

COOKING WITH WILD GAME

Author: **EDA**

Illust: **Kochimo**

VOLUME
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With everything taken care of, their outdoor restaurant was ready for business on the morning of the twenty-seventh day of the indigo month.

“In a way...
I feel as if I
have my own
house now.”

“We should
be good to
go now,
right?”



Ai Fa suddenly broke out in a smile.

“It brings me joy, being able to sense you so close. That feeling hasn’t changed in the least.”



“Right...”

This moment we were sharing was filled with bliss beyond even what we normally felt around each other.



“If every one of us puts their full strength into the task, there is no question that we will be able to take down the lord of the forest. And we will do it without any of us losing our lives. Our honor as hunters of the forest’s edge rests upon this.”

MENU

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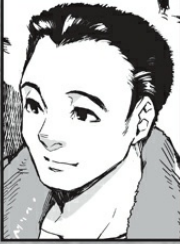
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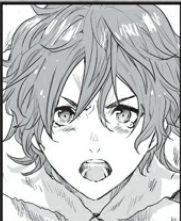


~ People of the Forest's Edge ~

	Asuta Tsurumi A chef-in-training born in Japan. Though he remembers losing his life in a fire, some strange power led him to another world.		Ai Fa The only female hunter at the forest's edge. She seems calm and composed at a glance, but hides strong emotions inside. She has made the decision to welcome Asuta into the Fa clan.
	Donda Ruu The head of the Ruu clan, and one of the three leading clan heads of the forest's edge. An exceedingly skilled hunter.		Darmu Ruu The second son of the main Ruu house. Though he can be blunt and rude, he's also very passionate.
	Reina Ruu The second daughter of the main Ruu house. An excellent chef. She also runs the Ruu clan's stalls.		Ludo Ruu The youngest son of the main Ruu house. Mischievous by nature. A stronger hunter than most.
	Rimee Ruu The youngest Ruu daughter. An innocent and earnest child. She adores Ai Fa and Tara.		Sheera Ruu The eldest daughter of a Ruu branch house. She's humble by nature, but is Reina Ruu's equal when it comes to cooking.
	Mida The youngest son of the former main Suun house. Currently he is a member of the Ruu clan, and is training as a hunter.		Dan Rutim The former head of the Rutim clan. He possesses uncommon strength as a hunter, but is currently recovering from an injury to his left leg.
	Gazraan Rutim The head of the Rutim clan. A calm-natured man with undeniable wisdom. Also, a peerless friend to Asuta.		Tsuvai The youngest daughter of the former main Suun house. Currently a member of the Rutim clan. She assists the Ruu clan with their business.
	Dari Sauti The head of the Sauti and one of the three leading clan heads of the forest's edge. Though young, he is a calm, composed, and broad-minded leader.	Raa Rutim The head of the Rutim clan before Dan Rutim. A composed old man with eyes like a hawk.	
		Moga Sauti The Sauti clan elder. Dari Sauti's granduncle. An old man with a warm personality.	

	Rau Lea The Lea clan head. A hunter with delicate looks but a fierce nature.		Yamiru Lea The eldest daughter of the former main Suun house. Currently a member of the Lea clan. She assists Asuta with his business.
	Yun Sudra A member of the small Sudra clan. Greatly adores Asuta.		Toor Deen Originally belonged to a Suun branch house. She is introverted by nature, but she gives her all to assist Asuta with his business.

~ Townsfolk ~

	Jeeda A hunter from Masara. Currently a guest of the Ruu clan, along with his mother Bartha.		Bartha A hunter from Masara. Used to be married to the leader of the bandit group known as the Red Beards.
	Tara Dora's daughter. Eight years old. She is becoming close with Rimee Ruu, who is around her age.		Yumi The daughter of the owners of an inn called The Westerly Wind. Friendly and cheerful. Sixteen years old.
Dora A citizen of the Daleim part of the Genos domain. He sells produce in the post town.		Nail The innkeeper of The Sledgehammer. Is friendly toward easterners.	
Naudis The innkeeper of The Great Southern Tree. Is friendly toward southerners.			

~ Extended Cast ~

Zattsu Suun The former Suun clan head. Was apprehended as a criminal and died while imprisoned.		Zuuro Suun The head of the Suun clan. Was sentenced to ten years of hard labor to pay for the crimes of the Suun.	
Oura Suun Zuuro Suun's wife and Tei Suun's daughter. Currently living as a member of the Rutim clan.		Diga Suun The eldest son of the former main Suun house. His weakness became apparent after the Suun's crimes were revealed, and he has been behaving himself since as a ward of the Dom clan.	
	Yamiru Suun The eldest daughter of the former main Suun house. Beautiful and quick-witted. Her name later became Yamiru Lea.		Doddo Suun The second son of the former main Suun house. Like Diga, he is currently staying at the Dom settlement and is behaving himself.
			Tei Suun A hunter from a Suun branch house. He attacked Asuta in the post town and was struck down as a criminal.

Chapter 1: The Ruu Clan's Outdoor Restaurant

1

"Man, this is making me kinda emotional," I said as I looked around.

Currently, it was the twenty-seventh day of the indigo month, four days after we returned from our trip to Dabagg.

It sure was something, thinking back on the path that led us here. And I was certain the women of the forest's edge by my side felt much the same.

It all started three days ago, on the day after we returned from Dabagg.

As we had taken the day off from our business in the post town, we invited Mikel to the forest's edge for the first time in a while so he could teach us how to make dried milk. After that, the time came to give Reina and Sheera Ruu's new dish a taste test.

"There may still be some fine details that we need to revise, but for the time being we consider it complete," Reina Ruu said as she held out a wooden plate with a serious look on her face. Contained within was a soup made using giba offal. "We catch five or six giba a day at the Ruu settlement, and over ten if you include our subordinate clans. Even if only half of those are successfully bloodlet, we still get ahold of a huge amount of innards every day, to the point that it was hard to figure out what to do with all of them."

"And we felt that if it was flavored like this, the townsfolk would at least give it a look, but what do you think? I would love to have you try it and share your thoughts."

I had lots I wanted to say too, but I focused on giving the dish a taste test first.

It was a really simple soup dish, with an underlying note of tau oil. However, the faint aroma of myamuu gave it a great scent.

"Since it's an offal dish, we parboiled it with lilo leaves. Then, for flavoring, we

had tau oil, myamuu, sugar, and chitt seeds.”

“We used everything aside from the small intestines that are used to make sausages, and for vegetables we had aria, tino, nenon, and pepe leaves.”

“Pepe leaves, huh? I see.”

Pepe leaves were akin to garlic chives. Apparently Reina and Sheera Ruu had decided to use them as vegetables rather than herbs.

There were no issues at all with the soup’s taste. The tau oil and sugar gave it a salty-sweet flavor, while the myamuu and chitt provided a truly stimulating accent. I really couldn’t sense the stench from the entrails at all. The unique flavor from the pepe leaves probably contributed a great deal to that last point as well.

Then you had the main ingredients, with all the different types of offal giving it some really delightful chewiness. You not only had the springy large intestine and stomach, but also the heart and diaphragm meat mixed in, which tasted very similar to normal meat, so nothing felt lacking at all.

The dish had hardly used any novel ingredients. But because of that, Reina and Sheera Ruu’s pure skill was easy to see from how wonderfully it had turned out.

“Yeah, this is delicious. It’s every bit as good as the offal hot pot stew with tarapa that Toor Deen prepared before.”

When I said that, Toor Deen turned my way in shock.

“I-I just covered up the stench of the innards with the strong flavors of the tarapa and chitt seeds, so I’d say this dish is far, far better than what I made.”

“Your dish had a real hearty flavor, Toor Deen, while this hot pot stew has a bit more of a subtle taste. But I wouldn’t say either is better or worse.”

Toor Deen looked more and more like she just wanted to run away, but Reina Ruu gently mediated.

“You’re more accustomed to handling innards, Toor Deen, so if it really is as good as your dish, then that’s an honor. And I also believe that we should share our honest impressions rather than trying to mince words when it comes to

cooking.”

The young chef didn’t seem to know what to say in response.

“Now that I think about it, we’ve never had a chance to taste your cooking before, Toor Deen. Could you please let us give your offal dish a try sometime?”

“Okay,” Toor Deen replied, her face now beet red as she looked down at the ground.

And when Myme chimed in, saying, “I’d love to try it too!” the young Deen girl looked ready to up and faint from embarrassment. “Still, this dish really is delicious! Giba innards are such an interesting ingredient!”

“Yeah, it’s every bit as good as karon offal... More importantly, though, you did an outstanding job with the seasoning,” Mikel stated with his same sour look as always.

At that, Reina Ruu’s expression tensed up a bit as she looked his way.

“Um, thanks to your help, Mikel, we now have a new ingredient to work with: milk serum. Do you think that we should use that in this dish?”

Milk serum was the liquid separated out from the solids during the dried-milk-making process, or what I knew as ‘whey.’

As Mikel stroked his square jaw, he muttered, “Milk serum, huh? There wouldn’t be any issue with using it. It doesn’t have all that strong of a taste to begin with... But you wouldn’t see all that big of a change from adding it either, so I don’t think there’s any need to go out of your way to try it.”

“Is that so? Well, it isn’t as if we’re going to be making dried milk every day, so it sounds good to me if we can avoid having to use milk serum.”

“Hmph. You sure are greedy, still wanting to tinker after making a dish this good.”

“That’s right!” Myme interjected with a smile. “This dish really is delicious! I’d love to have some more until I’m all full!”

“Thank you,” Reina Ruu replied with a smile of her own. “It’s very reassuring to hear the two of you say that. And it’s a true honor too,” she added, then shared a joyful glance with Sheera Ruu.

As I looked over at the two of them from the side, I chimed in. “But weren’t you talking about unveiling a new dish for the stalls? You plan on serving soup in the post town?”

“Yes. There’s only a few, but some stalls in the post town serve soup already.”

“Right. But that would require a lot of preparation, wouldn’t it? You’d have to prepare tables and chairs, and also plates and spoons too.”

“That’s true. But the Ruu clan has earned so many coins from food sales that we don’t know what to do with them, so I don’t believe that should be any issue. And my father’s given his approval as well.”

“Huh? You already got Donda Ruu’s permission?”

“Yes,” Reina Ruu answered with a firm nod. “You told us before, didn’t you? That cooking would be even more enjoyable if we could feel the same way making food for the townsfolk as we do for our family, and that doing so could lead us to improve even further. Sheera Ruu and I discussed it, and decided we want to serve a soup dish.”

“Ah... In other words, you want to experience your customers enjoying your cooking from closer up? And that’s how you decided on soup, which would need a place for people to sit?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

I was seriously impressed. On top of that, from the bottom of my heart I thought it was awesome that a person of the forest’s edge like Reina Ruu had come up with such an idea.

“Got it. In that case, let’s do everything we can to make it a reality. I figure if we consult with Milano Mas, we should probably be able to work out how to set up some seating.”

“Thank you,” Reina Ruu and Sheera Ruu replied with proud smiles.

Three days later, the outdoor restaurant was all set up.

First up had been securing the seating. We had a carpentry shop that I was acquainted with prepare wooden tables and chairs, as well as a frame to add a

canopy over them. It was the same place we had already used a number of times for totos wagons.

“Oh, so this time you need tables and chairs?” the place’s owner asked with a grin on his rugged face as he bit into a giba burger. Aside from just making purchases, we also saw him once a month for maintenance on the wagons, and we made sure to bring the owner, who didn’t get around much, a meal from the stalls whenever we visited. “You want to use them outside rather than indoors, right? It would probably be best to put them together cheaply and have you buy new ones once a year. So, how many do you need?”

“Let’s see... Can we order five tables that can fit four each, and enough chairs to match?”

“I should be able to take care of that over the course of today and tomorrow. I’ll have them ready for you by morning two days from now.”

“Huh? You can build them that quickly? Ah, and we’d also like to order a frame for a canopy to hang over everything.”

“That’s no trouble at all. Your business is really important for us. I mean, you’ve ordered four wagons in four months.”

Just the other day, I had bought new wagons for the small Sudra and Fou clans to do their shopping, and before that the Ruu clan had wanted one for their business, all of which had gone through this one carpentry shop.

The owner tossed the rest of the giba burger into his mouth, chewed it, and then added, “The real difficulty will be preparing that many wooden plates and spoons. We don’t handle small stuff like that here, but I know a lot of craftsmen who purchase lumber from the same dealers. Do you want me to introduce you to them?”

“Ah, that would be a big help.”

And so, we ended up getting the utensils, tables, and chairs all worked on simultaneously. Then we ordered a karon leather tarp for our canopy from a leather worker as well, which finished our prep work for the time being.

Next, though, we had to secure the space to set it all up. Normally, that would be handled just by paying a suitable location fee.

“What with the space and utensils costing so much, not many people try to open soup shops. But, well, considering how much you’ve been selling, I guess you don’t have anything to worry about,” Milano Mas had said.

The space for a normal stall usually cost one white coin for ten days, but since we needed to prepare seating as well, that meant we needed at least two more spaces. Since the Ruu clan ran two stalls already—one selling giba burgers and the other myamuu giba—that would mean they’d need to pay for five spaces in total. But from here on out, they would alternate those every other day and offer their new giba hot pot stew dish daily.

“So, what will you do with the seating after closing up for the day? I don’t mind taking care of them, but then you’d have to pay for the storage too, and it’d be a hassle transporting them back and forth, yeah?”

“That’s true. How do other stalls normally handle it?”

“They generally just leave them out. It’d be pretty weird for someone to steal a bunch of crude tables or chairs meant for use outside, and even more guards patrol the post town at night than during the day, so I don’t think there’s anything to worry about. But in that case, you’d have to pay for the spaces even on days you take off...”

Even so, three spaces for a day would be just three red coins. That sounded pretty cheap to avoid any extra hassle.

With everything taken care of, the Ruu’s outdoor restaurant was ready for business on the morning of the twenty-seventh day of the indigo month.

Perhaps it wasn’t completely open to the air with the leather canopy overhead, but considering the occasional squalls you got in Genos, that was just how it was gonna be. Regardless, we were all set up now.

The back of our three new spaces were pushed right up against the thickets that grew near the road, with all five tables and twenty chairs set up. The tables were simple wooden boards sitting on top of short logs, while the chairs were pretty much just stumps. However, the surfaces had been carefully smoothed out so that they wouldn’t catch on clothing or anything.

Then there was the canopy stretched out above the space, supported by a

sturdy wooden frame that came up around two and a half meters high. It was made to be just a bit higher in the middle, so that water wouldn't pool on top of it.

We also needed a setup for washing the tableware. We had prepared thirty sets of tableware to go alongside the twenty seats, but naturally they would need to be washed before they could be used again. After all, the girls were planning to prepare eighty servings of the soup dish, the same as the number of giba burgers they made.

Since some people might have been dissatisfied with just a soup dish without any fuwano or poitan, the plan was to offer a big plate filled to the brim for three red coins or a half serving for one red coin and one split coin, with the idea being that they could then order a cheaper giba manju or giba poitan wrap to go with it. However, that meant we would be going through plates even quicker.

With that all in mind, we purchased a wooden barrel to fill with water drawn from a well in order to wash the tableware.

I had, of course, heard that wells existed, but this would be our first time actually using one. The spot for drawing water was protected by guards, and anyone was able to draw from it for free. Having access to such an abundant source of water was surely yet another reason Genos was able to prosper so greatly.

At any rate, it was a pretty new experience, lining up with the townsfolk and all their carts loaded with barrels and vases for drawing water.

"We should be good to go now, right?" I called out.

Sheera Ruu was in charge for the day, and she gently smiled back as she answered, "Right." Then, she placed her hands over her chest and calmly closed her eyes. "In a way...I feel as if I have my own house now. How very strange. After all, it's only a covering over some tables and chairs, all furniture unlike anything we use."

"It's not strange at all. After all, you're opening a restaurant rather than just a stall. I'm feeling pretty emotional myself."

It really was a magnificent sight, seeing the two stalls each for the Fa and Ruu clans, and then the outdoor restaurant space set up beside them. I felt just as excited as Sheera Ruu as I got things ready on my side.

By the way, Sheera Ruu, Lala Ruu, and Tsuvai were the ones on duty for the Ruu clan today. As always, Ama Min Rutim was also scheduled to join once the sun hit its peak, but they hadn't increased their staff any further. To compensate, we had prepared the food for The Kimyuus's Tail and the other inns in the morning, so all of them would be able to remain here.

Now that they were selling soup, someone needed to wash the dishes. But if push came to shove, they could borrow help from our Fa clan stalls, so for now the plan was to give it a try with the current numbers.

"Jeez, our share sure is small considering the cost of the location, isn't it? Why go to all this trouble just to increase our expenses?" asked Tsuvai, the only one who looked displeased while getting things ready to open.



Lala Ruu angrily turned her way, but before she could say anything, I interjected. “It’ll be fine. I’m sure the novelty will draw even more customers than we had before. Lately, it’s started to look like we’re getting about as many customers as we’re ever going to, so if this starts attracting more attention, it should easily make up for the cost of the extra space.”

“Hmph! I guess you can just take it easy since it’s not your problem!”

“I don’t feel that way at all. It’s true that it’s up to each clan to decide what to do with their earnings, but we’re all working hard to help people see how delicious giba meat really is. And besides, if you break it down, that fee only amounts to three red coins a day, right? That’s not exactly the kind of spending we’d have to worry about.”

“But we used up lots of coins buying all this unnecessary stuff, didn’t we?”

“If you look at things long term, they should be able to earn it back soon enough. After all, Sheera and Reina Ruu created an incredibly delicious soup dish. This is just what’s called an upfront investment.”

“An upfront investment...?” Tsuvai questioned, her eyes narrowing. “I don’t get what you mean, but those words have the smell of coins lingering about them.”

“That’s exactly right. Bottom line, I’m sure the idea Sheera and Reina Ruu came up with will make the Ruu clan even wealthier eventually, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

To be honest, it felt like they had gotten a step ahead of me.

Considering the amount of leeway we had in our daily lives, preparing an outdoor restaurant was no issue. And selling a soup dish from a stall during the day would help spread the deliciousness of giba meat even further. I was sure this new direction was a big enough change to have a major impact on the future course of our business.

If this outdoor restaurant is a success, it will expand the scope of dishes we can offer a great deal. After all, so far we’ve been stuck with offering dishes that can be held and eaten.

Now, though, we could sell not only flame-broiled and soup dishes, but even stuff like curry and pasta at the stalls. While I felt frustrated that I hadn't managed to come up with the idea on my own, the fact that it was my comrades from the forest's edge who had figured out how to make it happen was a happy and reassuring thought. I felt like they had defeated me, but I was still happy about it.

So for now, I've got to give them all the support I can to make this business venture by the Ruu clan a success.

For this first go, they set things up so that Lala Ruu was placed in charge of the new giba hot pot stew, Tsuvai handled the giba burgers, and Sheera Ruu took charge of managing the outdoor restaurant and washing dishes. Since the giba burgers took more effort to make than the giba hot pot stew, our side prioritized giving Tsuvai our assistance when needed.

"If you're ever short-handed, Tsuvai, feel free to ask for help, okay?"

"Hmph! This is the Ruu clan's business, so there's no reason for the Fa to assist us."

"Aw, you don't have to be like that. You'll need a hand when heating up fresh tarapa sauce and patties, won't you?"

"Do you think I can't manage that much on my own?"

"That's not what I meant, but sometimes you need to step away to relieve yourself, so..." I started to argue, only for Tsuvai to shoot me a glare as she stirred the contents of her pot.

Yamiru Lea had been steaming giba manju beside me, and only now did she speak up. "You know, your approach is rubbing Tsuvai's nerves the wrong way, Asuta. If the time comes when she needs your help, you can just say she owes you one and force your help on her."

"Ah, I see. I still don't really know how to handle Tsuvai."

"I wouldn't say that's a particularly important concern. Tsuvai seems to enjoy complaining to you, and she hates people acting unnaturally reserved most of all," Yamiru Lea stated with a smug look.

I was feeling at a loss as to how to respond when a voice called out, “Hey!” from an unexpected direction. It had come from one of the customers who had lined up in front of the stall and was looking restless. “Is the food still not ready yet? Your soup uses tau oil, right? Hurry up and let me have some already.”

The man was a southerner with a dark-brown mustache, and he was just one member of the greater-than-usual crowd of customers attracted by their curiosity about the outdoor restaurant that had suddenly appeared.

Looking around, I saw Lala Ruu striking a triumphant pose in her spot on the other side of Tsuvai’s onion-like head.

“The soup dish seems like it’s ready. If you’d like to give it a taste, please go right ahead.”

“Oh, really? Hey, looks like they’re ready for business over there!”

With that, the majority of the customers excitedly crowded over to the giba hot pot stew stall.

And so, our business for the day once again got off to a lively start.

2

The giba hot pot stew stall was a booming success. The novelty really did seem to be the key. In fact, there was such a crowd of customers gathering that there was a line for those twenty seats.

In spite of that, though, the number of customers the rest of our stalls were getting hadn’t significantly dropped. In fact, the majority were seeking out one of the preexisting dishes to go alongside the soup as a light snack.

As the most expensive of the dishes at three red coins, business did seem to be a bit slow for the giba burger stall, but since its popularity was well established to begin with, there still didn’t seem to be any worries about even those failing to sell out.

“Come on, just give me some already! If there aren’t any seats, I’ll eat it standing!” Ultimately, some customers ended up eating their soup standing up after saying stuff like that. Those who bought multiple dishes just borrowed the

edge of a table and ate while standing. Even once we hit full capacity for standing customers too, the line still didn't get any shorter.

Though we'd thought we had prepared enough to have some leeway with those thirty sets of plates and spoons, they were all being used, so Sheera Ruu had to focus more on gathering the empty plates than washing them, which meant going around the seats became her main job. Things seriously were hectic. And amidst all that commotion, Yumi from The Westerly Wind suddenly popped up.

"Whoa, what's all this? I finally managed to slip out of the shop, but you're all full up?"

"Ah, welcome. So you're after the giba hot pot stew as well?"

"Of course! If you put out a new dish, I've got to see how it tastes! But I'm gonna have to wait my turn, huh...? It's not going to sell out, is it?"

"That shouldn't be an issue for now. We only just emptied the first pot."

Since we'd planned for eighty meals, we had prepared three huge pots of the stuff. But with one already empty before the sun had hit its peak, it seemed inevitable that it would sell out before we closed up shop for the day.

"Ah, Yumi!" a young girl's voice excitedly called out. It had come from Tara, who had been brought along by her father, Dora.

"Hey there, Tara. And long time no see, mister."

"Ah, Yumi, it has been a bit. I'm glad to see you looking well."

Yumi and Tara got along rather well, and it seemed that even Dora had been brought into the loop now.

"Thank you two for coming as well."

"Of course we came. It's not possible to get that new dish to go, so some buddies and I decided to take turns watching one another's places. After all, the soup dish you made at our place was just so amazing."

"Giba really is tasty in soup too, isn't it? And you used giba innards in today's soup, right? I'm pretty fond of kimyuus offal dishes myself..." Yumi chimed in with a smile. It was a charming sight, as if she were part of Dora's family too.

“Still, this certainly is an incredible turnout. Let’s line up before they sell out. Ah, Asuta, could Tara and I each get a giba manju?”

“Oh, I’d like one too.”

The three of them joined the line, munching on giba manju and looking quite content.

Business was seriously booming. When I stole a glance at the tables, I saw that the easterners and southerners had split off to the left and right so they wouldn’t end up at the same table, but it didn’t seem like they were causing any sort of commotion. There were just sounds of mirth filling the air.

Even though the giba hot pot stew used chitt seeds, an ingredient from Sym that folks from Jagar tended to avoid, there seemed to be more southerners gathered there than westerners, though I couldn’t say if they knew or not. Tau oil was incredibly good at drawing in customers from Jagar.

“What’s the matter? Are you that worried about how it’s going over there?” Toor Deen questioned, as she was the one working the stall with me thanks to the rotation.

“No,” I replied. “Actually, it just looks like a good time. I did a job like that back in my home country, clearing plates and washing them off.”

Toor Deen openly stared at me.

“Hmm? What is it?”

“Ah... It’s just, I was a little surprised since you don’t talk about your home country very often,” Toor Deen answered with a bashful smile. A charming expression that would surely ease the heart of anyone who saw it.

Just then, a voice cheerfully called out from the side, “Sorry for the wait!” The sun had finally hit its peak, and Yun Sudra and Ama Min Rutim had arrived.

“This certainly is quite the crowd. You must’ve been working hard, Tsvai,” Ama Min Rutim said.

“Hmph! I’ve had fewer customers than usual over here.”

“I’ll go check on Sheera Ruu. She must have had it rough, handling all that on her own, so hold on for just a bit.” Ama Min Rutim headed over to the outdoor

restaurant, while Yun Sudra looked up at me with a big grin.

“Where do you want me, Asuta?”

“Let’s see. Could I have you work the poitan wraps, Yun Sudra? Then Yamiru Lea can swap with Toor Deen and work the giba manju. I want to go check how things are going over there real quick.”

I tried my best to handle Yun Sudra just the same as I had up until now.

Even though everyone said she definitely had feelings for me, she hadn’t made a move herself, and I had tried to maintain a moderate distance with her to begin with. I didn’t feel like it would be right to act unusually cold toward her, so I felt like this was the best option for now.

Maybe I should ask someone how men of the forest’s edge deal with women who might have feelings for them when they don’t reciprocate...

Still, I had no idea whatsoever who would be good to ask about romance.

I figured Gazraan Rutim was a special case at the forest’s edge, considering he had remained single until the second half of his twenties, and Ludo Ruu seemed more interested in food than sexual urges. I was hesitant to rely on a simple and earnest guy like Shin Ruu about something like this, and I didn’t have much hope for Rau Lea, who was more forward than anyone I knew.

Well, her clan head, Raielfam Sudra, said to look at her in the long-term. If I were to explain my reasoning about why I can’t do that, it would have to involve my feelings toward Ai Fa. I can’t see myself doing something that embarrassing any more than I already have.

As I held back the sigh that was about to slip out, I moved over to the space under the leather roof.

Though there were only twenty seats, there were thirty folks packed in there, slurping soup. Lala Ruu had moved to the giba burger stall, Ama Min Rutim took over the giba hot pot stew stall, and Sheera Ruu remained in charge of dishwashing.

“Hey. So, how’s it going?”

“Well, we’re halfway through the second pot now. At this rate, we should sell

out within the next hour. Considering the majority of the customers are ordering the smaller size, it sure is selling fast,” Sheera Ruu answered with a smile as she wiped off a washed plate. Then she swiftly handed that plate to Ama Min Rutim, who filled it with hot pot stew for a waiting customer.

“Hmm, if we say a day of work is roughly three and a half hours...that would mean it’ll sell out in two-thirds of that. In that case, you might still sell out if you make one and a half times that amount tomorrow.”

“Do you think? But it may just be selling today due to the novelty.”

“If the customers today seem satisfied with it, they’ll keep ordering it going forward. So, how would you say they’ve been reacting to it?”

“Well...they mostly looked satisfied from what I could tell,” Sheera Ruu said, breaking out in an even brighter smile. Even though she had become quite a cheerful person, it was still rare for her to show it this openly on her face. “The Ruu clan had no custom of eating giba innards until we learned how to prepare them from Toor Deen, but I haven’t seen any resistance to this kind of dish from the townsfolk.”

“Yeah, supposedly folks from the west, south, and east eat innards from kimyuus, karon, and gyama respectively. But since they don’t last long, they aren’t really sold in the post town.”

“There are some people who just want ordinary meat, but folks generally seem happy with it. I really want Reina Ruu to see this soon.”

Since there were some folks who brought along fruit wine, it felt real lively, a bit like a banquet. However, there was an annoyed shout of “Hurry up and clear some seats!” from one of the customers lined up, only for another customer to chime in, “Cut that out. If the guards get called, we won’t be able to eat it at all.” For the time being, common sense among the customers was managing to keep the peace.

At one table, a group of middle-aged men from the south who looked to be work buddies were laughing away. And at another table, young men and women were huddled together enjoying the dish. It wasn’t rare to see parents and children together like Dora and Tara too. As for the easterners, they remained perfectly silent as they ate, as always. All this was what Sheera Ruu

wanted Reina Ruu to see. Even I was anxiously waiting to see what tomorrow would bring.

As those thoughts ran through my head, a displeased voice called out, “Hey.” Speak of the devil, we had a guard clad in leather armor approaching. The bustling crowd quieted down, looking rather daunted. “This is quite the commotion. Who is the owner of this stall?”

“Ah, I’m in charge for today,” Sheera Ruu answered, calmly stepping forward. The guard looked her slender figure up and down.

“Then allow me to give you official notice. It has been determined that there is an issue with this shop’s business, which must be revised for tomorrow onwards.”

“An issue? What would that be?”

“You rented this space with the canopy over it, didn’t you? That group sticking out from underneath over there clearly exceeds your territory. If you intend to keep running the same business from tomorrow on, then you should pay the cost to rent another space.”

Sheera Ruu and I looked in the direction he had indicated. Sure enough, though we hadn’t noticed it since the land beyond the outdoor restaurant was empty, a number of the customers standing and eating were clearly outside of the space covered by the roof.

“I see. Normally that would be a space for another stall, wouldn’t it? I’m truly sorry for overlooking something so important,” Sheera Ruu said with a deep bow. Then, she calmly looked up at the face of the displeased young guard. “But since we’ve already intruded into that space, shouldn’t we pay the fee for today as well? We will abide by the laws of Genos.”

“There’s no need to worry about today. But at any rate, you’re clearly lacking seats, aren’t you? So why not rent the neighboring space as well? Then you’ll get fewer people yelling for seats to open up too.” Though he acted haughty, I was impressed by how considerate the guard seemed to be. Just as I was thinking that, his gaze turned my way. “You also seem to be doing well, Asuta of the Fa clan... Now that things are so lively even this far north, we have to spend a lot more effort patrolling.”

“Huh? You’re...” I started to say, but then I suddenly remembered.

Back when we were still dealing with Cyclaeus, this was one of the guards who had dropped by to clear things up about the bandits dressed as hunters of the forest’s edge and the incident with Jeeda drawing his blade in town.

Though I didn’t remember the faces of each of the guards I saw, I could just barely recall this one talking a lot in place of the small man who was his commander.

“It’s been a while... Thank you for your help back then.”

“Hmph. I’m tasked with patrolling the post town, so I see all of you each and every day, you know. Though I suppose you don’t differentiate between us guards.”

“Well, with those helmets on it can be tricky telling you apart... But I do remember you. We talked with you in front of Dora’s shop, right?”

“Hmph,” the young guard muttered, jutting out his lower lip.

The man had likely believed in the righteousness of the militia. But a few days after he’d talked with us, the leader of their division, Ciluel, was exposed as a criminal, and not long after that, the vice-leader and two battalion commanders were similarly judged. It was undoubtedly his superiors who had been behind the people who were menacing Genos back then.

What must he have thought and felt about everything that had happened? Naturally, I wasn’t about to ask him, and he wasn’t going to just tell us out of the blue.

“Thanks to your expanding business, the section of town designated for stalls is running out of space too...” the young guard said as he looked over at the outdoor restaurant. We were located at the very north end of the post town, with nothing farther past us. There was enough space left for four or five more stalls to open up, but beyond that was a dense thicket. “It likely won’t be long before those woods are cleared. A large project like that may bring the local thugs here seeking pay, but try not to let any trouble crop up, okay?”

“Got it. We’ll take care,” I replied, and then voiced a small question of my own. “But will there really be a need for that much more stall space so soon?”

This is my fifth month now since opening for business, but I haven't seen all that much of a change."

"Of course there will be. After all, next month is the violet month."

I was taken aback, which made the guard shoot me a suspicious look.

"The sun god's revival festival is held in the violet month. It's only natural that there are more people and stalls around for the festival, isn't it? And since Genos is the most prosperous town in the area, tons of people will gather from all around to enjoy the event."

"Ooh, so there are festivals like that here in Genos too?" I asked, brimming with curiosity. However, the guard just looked all the more annoyed.

"From our point of view, it's just a needless increase in our workload. We don't have time to spend with family, and have to keep running around town chasing after suspicious outsiders... Hey, don't go causing a commotion for the festival, okay?"

"Right, understood."

With that, the young guard gave another "Hmph!" and then left.

In his place, Lala Ruu approached while holding a number of wooden plates.

"Huh? Weren't you over at the giba burger stall, Lala Ruu?"

"Sheera Ruu looked like she wasn't going to be able to keep up with the dirty dishes, so I gathered up the empty plates. Now, let's hurry up and help her get them washed."

Now that I had time to look, I could see that the line in front of the soup stall where Ama Min Rutim was working had gotten even longer. It seemed we really might have a need for additional seating and tableware. But for now, the three of us went ahead and cleaned the wooden plates and spoons.

"Hey, since the giba burger stall isn't all that busy, why don't I help out over here until I'm needed? I figure it would be more efficient if one of us keeps an eye on the seating while the other focuses on washing," Lala Ruu said.

"Right. And the one on washing duty can help out with that stall when needed... Ah, Tsuvai's been handling the giba burgers on her own this whole

time, though, so maybe it would be better to switch with her?”

“No, I think it would be better for me and you to take on this job for today and get the fundamentals down. Then I can tell Reina and Rimee how to do it, since they’re on for tomorrow. Those of us in the Ruu clan need to learn it properly first, since we’re the parent clan of the Rutim.”

“Got it. Then, I’ll have Tsuvai and Ama Min Rutim swap.”

Since this was really different from how we normally ran the stalls, we were definitely going to need all sorts of trial and error. But at least for now, there was no chance for me to interject and try to rearrange things. Still, Lala Ruu was so active while Sheera Ruu was always calm and composed; they made for quite the pair.

“Ah, Asuta, so this is where you were?”

As I stood a few steps away, watching Sheera and Lala Ruu struggle with the dishes, yet another person had called out to me. But this time around, the voice alone made it clear who I was dealing with. It was Myme and Mikel.

“Hey there, Myme. And Mikel, you too. Thanks for coming.”

“Heh heh, we already gave it a taste test, but I wanted to eat even more of it.”

Myme and Mikel had each ordered a separate dish alongside the giba hot pot stew. Myme had a giba poitan wrap, while Mikel had the special dish, the giba cutlet sandwich.

“The seats are all full, aren’t they? Um, is it all right if we put our stuff down here?” Myme asked a jovial customer from Jagar.

“Sure! But this guy next to me has sticky fingers, so make sure he doesn’t snatch your food!”

Having gotten permission, the two of them laid out a towel on the edge of the table and set their food down. Not long after, they were slurping their steaming hot pot stews.

“Mmm, it really is delicious! To think that chitt seeds and tau oil would go together this well!”

“Hmph. That’s not a rare combination at all in the castle town.”

Had Mikel skipped out on his work selling charcoal for the day? However he came to be here, he chowed down on his offal with the same sour look as always, his clothes stained black with soot. The cold war that had erupted between the father and daughter pair right before our trip to Dabagg had come to a close, and Myme’s mood seemed to have completely recovered. Still, I went out on a limb and touched on the matter a bit before getting back to my own work.

“By the way, Bartha will be guarding you when you open your stall, right? Do you think you’ll be setting the dates for that soon?” We had different groupings in the wagons for our return trip from Dabagg than we had on the way there. Apparently, while the two of them were riding together, they had really hit it off and ended up coming to an agreement.

“I only hunt in the morning, and I can chop firewood whenever I have time to spare. I’d actually be grateful for the chance to earn some daily wages,” Bartha had said with a grin.

Bartha was not only skilled, but also someone we could guarantee was trustworthy. When Mikel heard that she was a former member of the Red Beards and had played a significant role in taking down Cyclaeus, he’d begrudgingly had to accept that she was suitable for the job.

“Ah, could I ask you to deliver a message to Bartha about that? Could you tell her that I’m sorry, but I need a bit more time before opening a stall?”

“Huh? Did you run into some other issue?”

“No. It’s just that since I have the chance, I’d like to use karon milk. But I don’t know how to yet,” Myme answered with a smile. “Still, the year will end up changing if I keep dragging my feet, so at the latest, I’d like to at least be ready for the revival festival.”

“The revival festival, huh? I actually just heard about it recently. What sort of event is it?”

“Huh? I mean, it’s the sun god’s revival festival... Ah, right, you came from overseas, didn’t you? The revival festival is an event to celebrate the end and

beginning of the year. The most important dates are the last day of the violet month and the first of the silver month, with the festival kicking off halfway through the violet month. Things get really lively in the post town then.”

“It’s that sort of festival, huh? I had no idea, so thanks.”

It was already the twenty-seventh of the indigo month, so the violet month was getting pretty close. My heart was starting to soar at the thought of it.

“So, you’re aiming to complete your dish and open your stall by the middle of next month at the latest? Got it. I’ll let Bartha know.”

“I appreciate it.”

After I said farewell to the smiling Myme and the sour-faced Mikel, as well as Sheera Ruu, who was still working away as a dishwasher, I got back to my own work.

Yamiru Lea had been handling the giba manju stall on her own, and as she handed one to a customer she stole a glance my way.

“Sorry for the wait. You didn’t have any trouble restocking them, did you?” I asked.

“No. Toor Deen helped out. We seem to be selling even better than usual today, don’t we?”

“Oh, really? The extra attention drawn by the hot pot stew must be pulling in more customers on our end too.”

If that momentum wasn’t limited to just today, then that would mean a permanent increase in the number of customers we drew in. And that accomplishment was all down to Reina and Sheera Ruu.

“It seems quite hectic over there. It’s a good thing I didn’t end up having to help out.”

“Oh? It might be worthwhile to spend some time moving around while working rather than staying behind the stall and selling food, don’t you think?”

“Lala and Rimee Ruu may enjoy such work, but that isn’t the sort of person I am...” As a feeling of surprise came over me, Yamiru Lea suddenly shot me a chilly glare. “What? Should I have called them the third and youngest Ruu

daughters? It's unnatural to keep referring to people like that after learning their names, isn't it?"

"I-I didn't say a word."

"Your expression said you wanted to make a comment about it." Though Yamiru Lea had grown a lot gentler, her perceptiveness was still top notch. "By the way," she added with the same look in her eyes, "What do you intend to do in regards to Yun Sudra, Asuta?"

"Wh-What? I'm not intending to do anything."

"I see. So you don't plan to take her as a bride after all, then?"

More customers approached then, and I took their coins. After she handed them their giba manju from the steaming basket, Yamiru Lea once again looked my way.

"In that case, shall I spur that girl on? Then you won't have any more need to worry about it."

"S-Spur her on? What do you mean?"

"I mean get her to propose to you. If you refuse, then it's up to the Sudra to decide what to do next, right? Either she keeps helping with work despite being refused, or they offer a different woman to assist you. At any rate, it wouldn't be anything for you to worry about at that point."

This suggestion was just so sudden that I was left at a loss for words. Still, it made sense that someone as sharp as Yamiru Lea would be capable of reading that far into things.

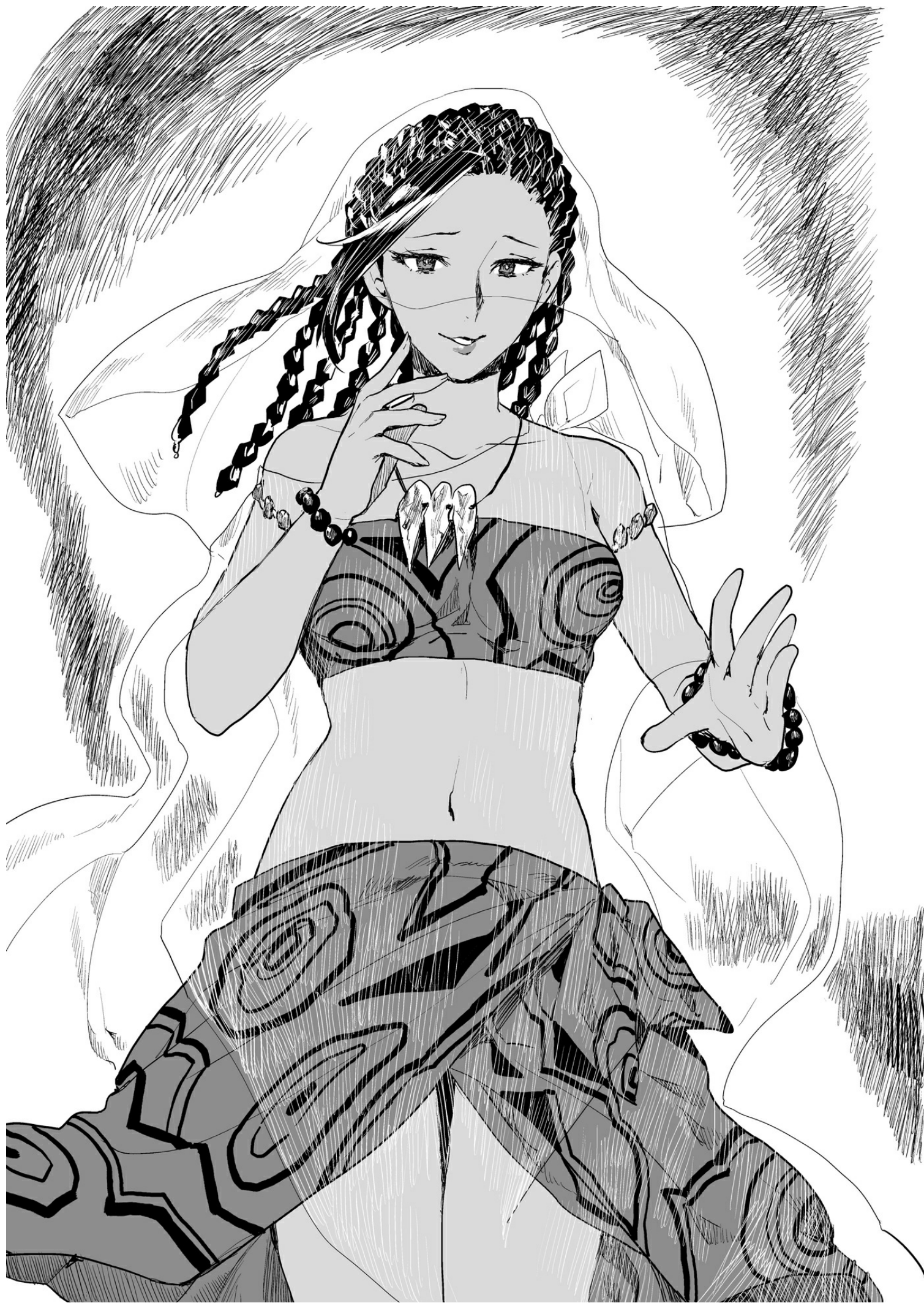
"Thank you for the concern. But how would you even spur Yun Sudra on in the first place?"

"That much is simple. I'll tell her that I'm thinking of asking to marry you. Then she'll ask you to marry her first in a fluster, don't you think?"

"It's wrong to mislead people like that, Yamiru Lea..."

"Then after she asks you, I can do the same. As long as you promise not to accept," Yamiru Lea said with a daring grin. "That would settle everything quite smoothly, wouldn't it? And then you would be free to concentrate on your

work.”



“I’d say I’ve been concentrating on my work just fine. And I really don’t think it’s good to go around plotting to meddle with someone’s emotions like that.”

“Oh really? I think it’s kinder to let a love that can never be wither away rather than allowing it to keep growing.”

“Is that way of thinking common among the people of the forest’s edge...?”

“I couldn’t say. After all, I was born and raised in a place removed from the customs of the forest’s edge.”

I ended up sighing yet again, just in time for another group of customers to arrive.

The surrounding crowd seemed even more daunted than when the guard showed up before, because a boxed totos carriage with the emblem of the house of Daleim on it was approaching from the north. The ones to appear from within were Polarth and Arishuna, accompanied by two soldiers.

“My, you seem to be seeing quite a bit of success today! Did you prepare all that seating?”

“Yes. Or to be more accurate, it was paid for by the people of the Ruu clan.”

“Yes, giba soups are quite delicious as well. I would like to give it a try myself in the near future.”

Today as always, Polarth seemed worry free and full of energy. Beside him stood Arishuna in a stylish silk cloak rather than the plainer sort meant for travelers, holding out her left hand.

“Asuta. This is payment, for the food, from before.”

“Thank you for being so courteous. And you can have this back, as promised.” I pulled a beautiful purple stone out of the cloth bag at my hip. It was a lapista stone, said to govern safe travels. “Thanks to this, our trip went just fine. So, again, thank you so much.”

“You seem, to have gained, a great deal,” Arishuna stated as she accepted it, looking through the translucent stone shining in the sunlight. “Meeting good people. Interacting with friends. Deepening your feelings toward the one you love...”

“H-Hey, Arishuna?”

“And a small trouble, overcome with great strength. That is what, the lapista tells me. Asuta, I am glad, your trip was, a success.”

“Right... Thank you.” As I broke out in a cold sweat, I stole a glance over at Yamiru Lea. However, she was just feigning ignorance as she handed a customer a manju. “Um, do you want to place an order today? The soup dish is over at that stall, though.”

“Ah, no, I just happened to have a free moment for the first time in a while today. Our plan is to use the opportunity to go eat that dish that uses all the herbs.” Naturally, he meant the giba curry. Now that I thought about it, I had met the two of them at The Sledgehammer before departing for Dabagg, and that topic had come up. “I’ve been helping Sir Torst with his work a bit lately, so it has become difficult to make time.”

“I see. You mean how you’re giving advice about the ingredients flowing into Genos? I’m sure Torst really appreciates it.”

“Right. It seems I somehow ended up in the position of being the most knowledgeable about which ingredients are being used in the post town and in what amounts. It certainly is strange, considering I do not hold any official post,” Polarth explained, a look of great amusement on his round face. “I need to have a bit of a meeting with Yang over at Tanto’s Blessing before that, though. I believe we shall be heading to The Sledgehammer around the second hour. Will we perhaps see you there, Sir Asuta? I would like to hear a bit about your trip to Dabagg, after all.”

“Got it. In that case, I’ll head there after finishing up with work.”

“You have my thanks! Well then, I shall see you later!”

Polarth headed back to his carriage in high spirits, with Arishuna following lightly after him like some sort of ghost. And with that, the mildly electric feeling that had been hanging in the air finally eased up.

I haven’t seen any nobles other than Polarth come to the post town so casually. Even with Leeheim, he had around ten soldiers surrounding him... I guess it really is unusual to have nobles coming to buy food from a commoner

like me.

That was probably the exact reason why Digola and Meilos ultimately slipped up in Dabagg and dug their own graves. The day after we made it back, Melfried hurriedly sent a messenger to Dabagg, having heard a report from Zasshuma, and I couldn't help but wonder what sort of fate awaited them.

But at any rate, we approached the midpoint for the day's business with our sales proceeding smoothly.

3

Our business for the day came to a close at the lower second hour without incident.

In specific, the giba hot pot stew sold out an hour before closing, while the giba manju, giba poitan, and the special giba cutlet sandwich were all gone by about thirty minutes later. That left only the giba burgers, with the last being sold right on schedule.

"It's looking pretty clear that the giba burgers are selling worse because they're the only ones that cost three red coins. Should we take a look at trying to sell smaller ones?" Sheera Ruu asked me.

"I'm not so sure. The myamuu giba is one thing, but if you adjust the size of the giba burger patties, it'll end up changing the feel of the entire dish, and then it might lose what people have come to like so much about it. Since they still sold out on schedule, I think it makes more sense to see this as the sales on the other dishes improving rather than the giba burgers selling worse."

"I see... I think I'll talk to Reina Ruu about it too. It's related to your sales as well, after all."

"Right. I think the first thing to try should be to prepare more of everything else for tomorrow and see whether or not the myamuu giba sales drop off."

We were closing up shop as we talked. After hooking the stalls to the wagon, we headed back toward The Kimyuus's Tail.

As for the outdoor restaurant, we went ahead and put a rope around it as

Milano Mas had instructed, then hung up a sign from The Kimyuus's Tail. That was apparently all it took to make it a crime for anyone to step inside and mess with the tables or chairs according to the laws of Genos.

“Well then, see you later, Asuta.”

“Yeah, you all take care.”

After returning the stalls, the Fa clan group headed for The Sledgehammer, while the Ruu clan group headed for the carpentry shop. We were splitting up so that I could talk with Polarth while Sheera Ruu and the others ordered more tables and chairs.

The plan was currently to expand the outdoor restaurant by two additional stall spaces in order to have room to spare. Then they would add two new tables, and bump up the number of chairs for each of them from four to six. Combined with their five current tables, that would bring them up to seven in total. At six chairs apiece, that would make forty-two seats.

Naturally, they also needed to prepare an appropriate number of wooden plates and spoons. That would pretty much get rid of the line in front of the stall, and also improve the turnover rate by quite a bit. Furthermore, preparing extra tableware would help alleviate the hectic cycle of needing to hand them out to each new customer as fast as they could be washed.

Since they would need to expand their leather canopy on top of all that, it would work out to some serious expenses, but it would still surely be within the limits of what Donda Ruu would give his approval for, so Sheera Ruu had made the decision to move ahead with it.

It really struck me how on the way back Tsuvai was muttering, “Upfront investment...” The Ruu were more than doubling their number of seats all at once, but Tsuvai was likely doing the math in her head to figure out just how much they would earn if they were able to fill them all up.

As for myself, I just felt excited and wasn't anxious in the least. Even if business was only booming because it was our first day open, we could keep offering all sorts of dishes as long as we had the seating. Soup dishes seemed to be Reina Ruu's specialty, and if we needed another option, I wouldn't mind giving curry or pasta a try. Any risks we might have been taking on didn't seem

all that bad.

At any rate, though, that was all a matter for tomorrow onward.

For now, I headed for The Sledgehammer in high spirits.

“Um, Asuta,” a voice suddenly called out from beside me, causing me to turn in surprise. Yun Sudra was supposed to be riding in the wagon, but at some point she had started walking next to me instead.

“Wh-What is it? If you want to get down from the wagon, you should let me know first.”

“My apologies. I thought it would be awkward to have to ask you to stop the totos,” Yun Sudra said with a bow, but there was a smile on her face.

She was a cute girl who wore her long gray-brown hair in a ponytail on the side. She was still only fifteen—and on the small side at that—but she had every bit as much womanly charm as Reina Ruu.

“Er, there’s something that I wanted to ask you. Would that be all right?” she said.

“Yeah. What is it?”

“What did you hand to that eastern woman before?”

I felt my heart skip a beat. But just as I was starting to worry that she had heard what Arishuna had said, Yun Sudra gave me a carefree smile.

Well, even if she did hear, it wouldn’t be so bad, I guess. I just have to make sure none of the other women end up misunderstanding, I thought, then steeled myself to respond.

“I was returning a charm for travelers to her. She gave it to me before we left for Dabagg. Now that I think about it, I got it from her before the sun hit its peak, so I guess you must not have been around.”

“A charm for travelers? Are you very close to that woman, Asuta...?”

“I wouldn’t say that. She’s just someone who came to eat my cooking at the inn before. That noble, Polarth, is the one who introduced us.”

“I see...” Yun Sudra replied, her gaze cast downward as she thought about

something. Then she looked back up at my face. “You really can form bonds with anyone and everyone, can’t you? Even though you’re a person of the forest’s edge, you treat people from every kingdom equally. You even talk to nobles like they’re friends... It really is amazing.”

“Well, I wasn’t born on this continent to begin with, so I can’t see any reason to go sorting people out based on where they were born or their rank.” That said, I did have a definite prejudice against nobles, but thanks to Polarth those feelings had softened up quite a bit.

“Not just anyone can do that, even if they don’t have any reasons either. And whether you’re talking to someone from the leading clans or a small clan like the Sudra, you treat them all the same too...”

“Maybe, but Raielfam Sudra is a great man who interacts with the leading clan heads as well,” I replied, but Yun Sudra’s expression didn’t shift. At some point, though, I noticed her gaze growing even more passionate. “At any rate, I’m not all that great of a person...”

“Right, you aren’t fond of being praised over and over, are you? I won’t say anything further, then. I just...wanted to tell you how I felt.”

Yun Sudra really was an earnest girl at her core, fittingly for a person of the forest’s edge. And there weren’t any particular issues with what she was saying. However, I had complicated feelings about the fervor I was seeing in her eyes.

“Ah, there’s The Sledgehammer,” I said, pointing toward the building that had come into view in front of us. A huge totos carriage was parked next to the inn. After nodding to the soldier watching over it, I went ahead and brought our own wagon to a stop. “Well then, I have to go have a bit of a talk, so...”

“Um, would it be all right for me to accompany you?” Yun Sudra asked without a moment’s delay. “I’d like to know more about the nobles of Genos too. Is it too presumptuous for a member of the Sudra clan to think such a thing, though...?”

“No, I wouldn’t say so...” I replied, my gaze wandering as I tied Gilulu’s reins to a nearby post.

And then, I spied Yamiru Lea’s head poking out of the wagon.

“Even if you’ve gotten quite friendly with the townsfolk, I don’t think we should be letting you run around on your own, Asuta. Though someone does need to stay with the wagon as well,” Yamiru Lea said, turning and looking at the young girl next to her. “Toor Deen, you’re interested too, aren’t you? After all, this isn’t just about that noble’s impressions of the food, but also a discussion regarding Dabagg.”

“Really? In that case, I would like to come along too...”

“I see. Then you can come with us, Toor Deen. Sorry, Yamiru Lea, but could you watch the wagon?”

“I’m the one who suggested it, so I can’t see any reason for you to apologize.”

And so, I went into The Sledgehammer accompanied by Toor Deen and Yun Sudra.

Right away, Nail approached from the dining hall and gave a polite bow. “Thank you for coming, Asuta. Sir Polarth has been awaiting your arrival.”

“Ah, thanks. Sorry for always imposing on you.”

“Think nothing of it. It really is no burden at all, considering everything I’ve received from you,” Nail stated calmly, as expressionless as always. The smell of curry was already hanging thick in the air. “And it would normally be unthinkable for a member of a count’s house to visit the post town, much less a shop on a side street such as this. I’m certain that it will attract a fair bit of attention from people wondering what sort of food would draw a noble out here to eat it.”

“I see. If it benefits you, then I’m glad to hear it.”

As we were chatting, Nail led us into the dining hall. When we entered, Polarth greeted us. “Ah, Sir Asuta! We arrived ahead of you, so we’ve already had the dish! It truly is something splendid!”

“Oh, really? I’m glad to hear you liked it.”

“It’s very spicy, but also absolutely delicious! I believe a dish using this many herbs would earn better accolades in the castle town than the post town, though! Naturally, easterners must appreciate the wonders of this dish even

more than we do, of course!”

Polarth seemed every bit as elated as he had been at the dinner party in the castle town.

That made me wonder what an easterner like Arishuna thought, and when I turned to look, I found that her hood was down, revealing the star reader’s slender face. She was standing with her face as expressionless as always. Then, she grasped my hands with fingers adorned by a great many rings.

“Asuta. I am an easterner, but I have never, set foot in Sym. My family was exiled, from their homeland, and I was born, as they wandered, about Selva.”

“R-Right. I heard about that before.”

“However, my family sought out, herbs from Sym, as much as possible. I was raised, on those herbs. That is how I know. Asuta, your dish, is simply magnificent...” Though her words sounded passionate when taken on their own, she didn’t actually show any emotions on her face; her black eyes were as calm as a moonlit lake. However, I could feel a definite warmth from her fingers grasping my hands. “Duke Genos, has given me, all sorts of food. I have experienced many fantastic dishes. However, this dish I ate today, was more delicious, than any of them. I firmly wish, I could have had, my family taste it.”

“It’s an honor to hear you say that. Seriously, thank you.”

For a while after, Arishuna silently stared into my eyes. Then she simply let go of my hands as if nothing had occurred.

“I allowed my emotions, to get the better of me. I am, truly embarrassed.”

“A-Ah, no, no matter how much you easterners get flustered, we really can’t tell, so please don’t worry about it.”

Arishuna then gave a bow and gently sat down.

As I scratched my head, I stole a glance over at Yun Sudra, but she was just smiling away and didn’t seem concerned at all by Arishuna’s actions. After all, only at the forest’s edge was it a custom to not touch a member of the other sex unnecessarily.

Polarth spoke up again. “My, but it truly is a splendid dish! The inside of my

mouth won't stop tingling, and yet I just couldn't keep from eating more! The kimyuus leg meat was quite fine as well, but this curry dish is simply sublime!"

Looking at the table, there were a number of plates there, and a kimyuus leg bone was sitting on one of them. It was the lower second hour, or in other words, that in-between time past two in the afternoon, and yet they had enjoyed a full meal set.

"Um, it's a bit awkward to admit after everything you've said, but that dish was actually prepared by Nail, not me."

"Hmm? But I'm certain we ordered your dish, Sir Asuta. This must be the giba meat curry!"

"Yes. But I only sold the base for the curry. It was up to Nail and his skills to figure out what sort of dish to make it into."

"No, I simply followed the instructions you taught me, Asuta. And I didn't use tau oil, sugar, or ramam fruit, so I'm sure it doesn't measure up to the taste of what you make," Nail chimed in.

"That's not true at all," I replied. "I gave it a taste test too, and even though it's different, I wouldn't say it's a matter of one being better or worse. I think the way you make it would better suit the tastes of your customers from the east."

I had just used tau oil, sugar, and ramam fruit out of a desire to get it as close to the taste I knew from back home as possible. But Nail's dish didn't use those and instead had a stronger spiciness from the chitt seeds, which brought it closer to an Indian-style curry. But it definitely didn't come up short of mine in terms of flavor.

"But you are the only one capable of balancing the spices properly, which is essential for the curry, so I still think of it as your dish rather than my own."

"It's really not. Ah, and all the dishes aside from the giba curry were entirely made by Nail, since I only sell The Slegehammer dishes that use giba meat."

"Yes, understood. You are both truly splendid chefs. I am very much in awe," Polarth said with a smile. "Still, I had known full well of Sir Asuta's cooking skills, but I did not ever think that you were such an excellent chef, good innkeeper.

You made this kimyuus dish and the soup with the herbs?”

“Yes, I made those based on the cooking I studied in Sym.”

“Oh, my! You have traveled to Sym?”

“Yes. In my youth, I lived there for a few years.”

“I see, I see. That makes sense of things! With this level of skill when it comes to handling herbs, I imagine you could open a restaurant for Sym cooking in the castle town.”

“That’s an exaggeration. However, I’m honored to hear you say that,” Nail replied with a polite bow.

As he stared back at the man, Polarth said, “Hmm... Still, Sym is even farther than Jagar. Since folks from Sym have a tendency to wander about, many of them visit Genos, but for the same reason, they rarely stay for long. It certainly is quite rare to find a citizen of the west so versed in the culture of Sym. And when it comes to Sym cuisine, I would say you would be a match for even the chefs of the castle town.”

“I think of Sym as my second homeland...so I find my greatest joy in seeing its people enjoying themselves.”

“In that case, today must be one of unparalleled joy for you. After all, look at how truly satisfied Lady Arishuna is,” Polarth said, drinking down the rest of his cup of tea. “At any rate, these were all splendid dishes! I cannot help but wonder what sort of impressions Sir Varkas would give were he to try this giba curry in particular. Yes, I am deeply curious indeed.”

“I see. I’d like to have Varkas try it too if the opportunity arises.”

But that was just my own personal desire, and it was more important to prioritize spreading it throughout the post town. The Sledgehammer was one thing, but the giba curry seemed to be earning quite the reputation at the other three inns as well, though I hadn’t gotten to see their customers actually eating it. It still didn’t feel real to me.

“Well then, I realize you are a busy man, Sir Asuta, so why don’t we move on to the other topic at hand?” Polarth said, straightening up his relaxed posture.

“Regarding the incident in Dabagg... It seems those two men, Digola and Meilos, truly had lied about Genos lowering the price on karon in order to embezzle money. Apparently, Cyclaeus paid them excess coins in order to control the flow of karon meat, and so they suffered losses with his downfall. Thus, they stole from the other ranch owners in order to make up for their own earnings going down.”

It seemed that Zasshuma’s assumptions had more or less hit the mark.

“The two of them were relieved of their positions as firm head and external affairs official, and the funds they embezzled have been seized. From what I am told, they shall receive a fitting punishment for deceiving the lord of the land and the ranch owners. Though that matter must still go to trial, so I am not certain what precisely that may entail.”

“I see. Well, as long as an injustice has been made right.”

“Indeed. And another person took up the post of head of the firm, so we wish to use the opportunity to re-evaluate our purchasing of karon meat as well.”

“What does that mean, exactly?”

“There were a number of proposals, but I had a suggestion regarding the circulation of meat,” Polarth said with a grin that called to mind a mischievous child. “Currently, karon torso meat is only sold in the castle town, following the agreements made with Cyclaeus, who believed that poor people had no need for torso meat. Therefore, selling it outside of the castle town was seen as a crime.”

“Oh, really? I didn’t know that.”

“Right. In actuality, since torso meat cost so much more than leg meat, hardly anyone outside of the castle town wanted it in the first place, so it wasn’t seen as an issue. But these days, even valuable ingredients from Sym and Jagar can be purchased by anyone who wants them. It makes sense for karon torso meat to be the same. It would make no difference if nobody wishes to buy it regardless, but even so, declaring that purchasing it is a crime is simply ridiculous.”

“I agree. When we went to Dabagg, it felt more than a little odd to me...

Despite how Genos is supposed to be more prosperous than Dabagg, when it comes to the food commoners eat, Dabagg seemed much, much better off.”

“Yes, in Dabagg you can eat as much karon meat as you please at any inn. The Genos post town is restricted to leg meat, so it is only natural that it cannot compete,” Polarth said with an amused smile, leaning forward. “At any rate, I believe we should strive to make it so that anyone can handle whatever cut of karon they please from here on out. The lives of the people in the Daleim and Turan lands have also been steadily improving since Cyclaeus’s downfall, so I believe there should be more people out there who would want to splurge a bit and purchase some torso meat.”

“Yeah, that sounds like a fantastic idea.”

“On top of that, the sun god’s revival festival is fast approaching. If we take advantage of that, it should make it easier to popularize torso meat outside of the castle town.”

“Taking advantage of the revival festival?”

“Indeed. A great many people stream into Genos for the festival. As a result, it is the best time of the year for businesses to earn coins. Both inns and stalls strive to put out first-rate dishes with high-class ingredients in order to draw in more customers... That is the type of trend I am aiming for. With the excitement from the festival, people will spend even more coins than usual.”

I really couldn’t help but feel he should have been born a merchant rather than a noble. Still, it was a good thing for me that he wasn’t.

“I was thinking we could start selling dishes using torso meat at Tanto’s Blessing as soon as possible...but would it be possible to ask for your assistance as well, good innkeeper and Sir Asuta?”

“Karon torso meat, you say?” Nail asked with an expressionless tilt of his head. “I handle more kimyuus than karon at my shop. Is karon torso meat truly that delicious?”

“It sure is. I’d say it rivals giba meat in taste, at the very least. And right now, it still costs more than giba too,” I replied.

Nail cast his gaze downward, deep in thought. “Now that you mention it, I

recall hearing tell of how giba meat may eventually end up at the same price as karon torso meat. With that in mind, it may make sense to purchase karon meat now...”

“Right. I’m sure you would be able to come up with new Sym-style dishes using karon torso meat, Nail. And if you’ll have me, I could give you some instructions on how to handle it.”

When I said that, Nail’s questioning eyes lit up.

“You certainly seem eager, Asuta. But if karon meat sells more, won’t that mean sales of giba meat will fall?”

“No. I don’t think it’s a matter of giba or karon being superior or inferior to one another, so it’s nothing to seriously worry about. Actually, I’d be really grateful to see a trend of more people deciding that expensive ingredients are worth purchasing.”

At any rate, if it was something to be decided by the nobles of Genos, then I lacked the power to stop it anyway. In my mind, the right choice was to try to find the best path forward with those circumstances in mind.

“Giba, karon, and kimyuus all have something to make them delicious in their own way, and I think it’s important to fully understand that. We want the tastiness of giba to be so well known that it’ll still be successful even if people learn how good karon can be. Or at least, I’ve been trying to move things in that direction.”

“I see,” Nail replied, a gentle light in his eyes. “As long as it is not doing you an injustice, then I have no objections to handling karon meat.”

“I am much obliged, Sir Asuta and...Sir Nail, was it? I am certain that the question of whether or not Genos can become a truly prosperous town rests on the shoulders of citizens such as you two,” Polarth said as he earnestly smiled.

Chapter 2: The Suffering of the Sauti Clan

1

Now, though the day had already been quite impactful and hectic with the opening of the outdoor restaurant and the discussion regarding karon meat with Polarth, something even more shocking awaited us upon our return to the Ruu settlement. And this time, the surprise was a completely negative one.

“Hmm? What in the world is going on?”

When we pulled the wagon into the settlement, I could sense a disturbance. Normally, people would be working away chopping firewood, drying out pico leaves, and weaving grass around this time of day, but instead everyone was gathered in front of the main house. There was a clear feeling of unrest that swirled in the air, and I could spy a toto's long neck sticking up beyond the crowd.

“Could it be that someone from the Dom clan came to lodge a complaint about Lem Dom?” Toor Deen asked while leaning forward in the wagon, sounding obviously concerned.

Lately, Lem Dom had been entering the forest in the morning along with Bartha and Jeeda to learn how to hide her presence and handle a bow. Since she was hunting wild birds rather than giba, it just barely avoided going against the customs of the forest's edge, but it was still a fact that she was learning how to be a hunter. It wouldn't be strange at all for that to earn her Deek Dom's wrath.

“No, I'm pretty sure the toto from the northern settlement is more black. That really yellow one is definitely from the Sauti clan,” I replied as I stopped the wagon before reaching the crowd.

The sun was still high in the sky, so it was just women and children gathered there. When they noticed us, they quickly parted to make way as the commotion carried on...and that was when we saw something truly

unexpected.

“Dari Sauti! What happened to you?!”

“Ah, Asuta, I’m glad to see you looking well.”

This was my first time seeing Dari Sauti since the welcome banquet for Welhide. However, with the way the young leading clan head looked now, I couldn’t help but be worried.

He had gray bandages wrapped around his head, blotted with red blood. His left arm was suspended in a sling, like Ai Fa’s had once been. What had changed most of all, though, was his face. His gentle square face was coated in stubble and had grown so emaciated that he looked like a different person, while his eyes were burning bright with uncharacteristic anger and regret.

“Perfect timing, since I wanted to let you know as well... Still, I suppose the Fa clan head Ai Fa is out chasing giba right now.”

“Y-Yes, I believe so, but more importantly, what happened to you, Dari Sauti?”

“Allow me to explain in detail,” a hoarse voice called out from behind Dari Sauti’s huge figure. A skinny old man with a beard as white as snow appeared.

“You’re...Moga Sauti, aren’t you?”

“Ah, so you remembered the name of an old bag of bones such as myself? That makes me glad to hear, Asuta of the Fa clan.”

Since there weren’t many older folks at the forest’s edge to begin with, there was no chance of me mistaking him for anyone else. We had only met once, way back at the clan head meeting, but I recalled that he was the elder of the Sauti clan, Moga Sauti. And just as I remembered from before, he was again wearing a calm, gentle smile.

“We came to seek the Ruu clan’s aid... A lord of the forest has appeared for the first time in several decades.”

“A-A lord of the forest?”

“Indeed. It is an unbelievably huge giba. From what I hear, it is even more massive than the lord I saw in my youth, and it has inflicted terrible injuries on

the hunters of the Sauti clan.”

“Seven of our hunters have suffered serious injuries, myself included. Of them, two now straddle the line between life and death, and even if their lives are spared, they will never again be able to hunt,” Dari Sauti stated, mustering all his strength to continue on. “As the head of the Sauti clan, I cannot imagine anything more devastating. And the lord is still prowling about the area surrounding our settlement, not having lost any strength at all. At this rate, the Sauti clan’s destruction is only a matter of time.”

“That is why we came to seek the aid of the Ruu...and the Fa clan as well,” Moga Sauti added, looking at me with a terribly calm gaze. “Please, lend us your strength. We require assistance from each of you, Asuta of the Fa clan.”



Apparently, a massive giba known as a lord of the forest had appeared near the Sauti clan five days ago.

At first, it was just one hunter who had seen it at a distance, so it was written off as some sort of mistake on his part. After all, the beast was just that abnormally massive.

But the following day, a number of hunters encountered the huge giba. And when they did, three of them suffered serious injuries.

There was no way of measuring precisely how big it was, but it was around as tall as a human, and its length and breadth were proportional with that. A giba bigger than a karon. Despite its massive size, it could still move just as nimbly as any other giba, and it was even more ferocious than most.

The day after that, they carefully laid out traps and planned to use the full might of the Sauti and all their subordinate clans to take it down. However, the lord easily broke through their traps and incapacitated another four hunters.

“I’m certain that my sword struck it in the neck. However, the blade snapped and I ended up taking the brunt of the lord’s charge, which is how I ended up like this,” Dari Sauti recollected, his voice dripping with regret. Apparently, he had broken a bone in his left forearm, the one now hanging in a sling. “No matter how much we drove our blades into it and showered it with arrows, the

lord showed no signs of weakening. Even the name 'lord of the forest' feels insufficient for it. That thing... It's a god of calamity."

"Lords such as this appear at the forest's edge only once every several decades. Maybe it has been hiding deep in the forest until now, or perhaps it was simply born large to begin with... At any rate, it is several times larger than an ordinary giba and also exceptionally aggressive." Moga Sauti continued the explanation.

"Before long, it will easily eat through the blessings of the forest surrounding our settlement. If it simply heads east back into the forest after that, then it would be no issue, but if it moves north, then clans smaller than us Sauti will be forced to deal with that monster. And if it heads west or south...it will exit the forest and go after the fields of Genos."

"If even we can't stop the lord, the townsfolk will certainly be helpless against it. And if things go poorly, the threat could go beyond just the fields and even reach into the town proper."

"We must take that monster down here at the forest's edge." And so Dari Sauti had stamped down all his shame and regret in order to come ask for the assistance of the Ruu clan, which had no relation to his.

Between the Sauti and their five subordinate clans, they had twenty-three hunters in total. Out of that number, seven had been seriously injured, and half of those remaining were also hurt. At this point, the Sauti no longer possessed the strength needed to take down the lord of the forest. Dari Sauti was pleading for the aid of the Ruu clan in order to save all of the people of the forest's edge and the citizens of Genos.



"I see... I think I get the gist of what is going on," Ai Fa calmly replied after hearing all that.

The sun had set and it was currently dinnertime. I had invited Moga Sauti to the Fa house, and he was dining alongside us. Meanwhile, Dari Sauti and the other hunter who had accompanied him were meeting face-to-face with Donda Ruu back in the Ruu settlement.

“I can understand your request for the Ruu clan’s aid, but why in the world are you seeking the help of the Fa clan?”

“Fa clan head Ai Fa, I have heard tell that you are skilled at the use of giba summoning fruit. We would like you to lend us your skills in that regard,” Moga Sauti replied in a voice every bit as calm as Ai Fa’s. “Thanks to the dangers associated with using giba summoning fruit, those techniques have been lost to the passage of time. At this point, only a few hunters of the forest’s edge still know how to use them... But if we use your experience along with the techniques for handling giba warding fruit known by the Sauti, we should be able to better direct the giba’s path.”

“Ah... So that’s why.”

“And from what I hear, you are also a skilled enough hunter to have made it into the final eight at the Ruu clan’s festival of the hunt. I am asking you, please use that strength to bring peace to the forest’s edge and Genos.”

“As one who makes a living as a hunter, it is a true honor to receive such a request...” Ai Fa replied, but there was a piercing glare in her blue eyes.

“However, what is this about you wishing to welcome not only myself but Asuta to the Sauti settlement? A chef’s help shouldn’t be needed in taking down the lord of the forest, should it?”

“There are three reasons for that. The first is to bring relief to the injured hunters. Secondly, to give life back to the members of the Sauti clan teetering on the brink of despair. And finally, to grant the hunters who will be facing the lord of the forest as much strength as possible. It will surely take a considerable amount of time to defeat the beast,” Moga Sauti said, and then he broke out in a gentle smile. “You have told us that delicious cooking will bring the people of the forest’s edge great strength, did you not? And now is precisely the time that we need such strength, Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa clan.”

My clan head just silently stared as she listened.

“Donda Ruu has agreed to lend us the aid of not only his hunters but his chefs as well. The women who do business in the post town will come and stay at the Sauti settlement. During the day, they will carry out their work in the post town, and then they will prepare dinner at our settlement afterward... We wish to add

Asuta's strength to theirs, but is that perhaps too much to ask?"

"Well...I cannot say I'm fond of the thought of leaving my clan member on his own while I'm at the Sauti settlement... Still, he wouldn't be in any danger?"

"Of course he wouldn't. Even the lord of the forest wouldn't charge into the settlement. And just to be safe, we are using giba warding fruit in order to protect the settlement as well," Moga Sauti said as he set down the plate he had been holding. "After learning bloodletting and cooking techniques, our clan has grown capable of making delicious food, but the strength provided by your cooking is on an entirely different level, Asuta. If they eat it, it's possible the women and children of the Sauti might start to smile once again... That is what our clan head Dari Sauti said. And here tonight, I have personally seen that those words are absolutely, undoubtedly true. So please, we would like the both of you to lend us your aid."

At that, Ai Fa glanced my way, and I gave her a big nod back.

Then, after closing her eyes for a moment, she replied, "Very well. If it is for the peace of the forest's edge and Genos, then we can do no less. I pledge that Asuta and I shall lend you all the aid we can in order to avert the disaster closing in on the Sauti."

"You have my thanks. I shall never forget my gratitude to you, Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa clan," Moga Sauti said, placing both fists on the floor and deeply bowing his head.

Ai Fa frowned as she watched the old man, then her gaze turned toward the front door. As soon as she did, there was a knock.

"My apologies for bothering you so late, but I am a member of the Sauti clan sent by the leading clan heads Dari Sauti and Donda Ruu. There is a matter I must inform the Fa clan and our elder, Moga Sauti, of."

I went to stand up, only for Ai Fa to hold me back and go greet him herself. After she took the young hunter's sword and led him into the room, he sat down beside Moga Sauti.

"The Ruu clan's hunters will head to the Sauti settlement tomorrow before the sun hits its peak and lend us their aid. If you are to accompany us, clan head

of the Fa, we ask that you head to the Ruu settlement by the upper sixth hour.”

“Understood. By the way, how many hunters will the Ruu clan be sending?”

“Ten in total from the Ruu, Rutim, and Lea. They decided on that number because there wouldn’t be any point in bringing along hunters who lack sufficient strength, and furthermore, if their small subordinate clans sent their skilled hunters, it would place those clans in peril. If you wish to know their names, I can tell you that as well.”

“In that case, please do.”

“Very well. The Ruu clan is sending Donda Ruu, Darmu Ruu, Ludo Ruu, Mida, and their guests Barthas and Jeeda. Then there are Gazraan, Dan, and Raa Rutim from the Rutim clan, as well as Rau Lea from the Lea clan, bringing the total to ten.”

The list included six of the names that had made the top eight in the Ruu clan’s contest of strength. It was quite the lineup.

However, there were some names mixed in there that definitely piqued my curiosity. Ai Fa must have felt the same way, since she knitted her brow doubtfully and commented, “They are all certainly skilled hunters. But it’s rather unexpected to hear the guests Barthas and Jeeda included in the count. And Raa Rutim is the Rutim elder, is he not?”

“Apparently, Barthas and Jeeda were asked to participate for their excellent skills with a bow. And Raa Rutim will be working alongside Dan Rutim to sniff out giba. After all, Dan Rutim still lacks the strength needed to run around in the forest.”

That explanation was enough to satisfy me. And Jiza Ruu must have been the only one from the top eight left out because according to custom, in times of emergency either the clan head or their heir needed to remain at home. But since Dan Rutim had already stepped down as clan head, both he and Gazraan Rutim were able to head out together.

Still, it was a surprise to hear that the heads of the main houses belonging to the strongest clans under the Ruu—in other words, the Ruu themselves, the Rutim, and the Lea—would all be participating. It really was a selection of the

top picks from their clans.

Donda Ruu was apparently preparing to face the lord of the forest with the strongest lineup possible. That thought was enough to send a tingle down the spine of even someone like me, who wasn't even a hunter.

"Would it be possible for me to accompany you as well?" a woman's voice suddenly chimed in out of nowhere, causing everyone but Ai Fa to glance around.

There were blackish eyes gleaming beyond the lattice in the window. The Sauti hunter went to stand despite having handed over his blade, but Ai Fa indicated for him to stop and said, "Hold on. That is simply the foolish woman who was driven from the Dom clan, Lem Dom. Lem Dom, it goes against the customs of the forest's edge to eavesdrop on someone's conversation from outside the window..."

"Oh? But you realized I was there from the start, so I wouldn't say it really counts as eavesdropping. I was just waiting this whole time for you to invite me inside."

"There was no reason to invite you in. You've already received your dinner. Hurry back home and get to sleep."

"Before that, I would like to hear the answer to my question from before. Would it be possible for me to accompany you to the Sauti settlement?"

It was dark out, so I couldn't see her expression, but her voice sounded dead serious.

As Ai Fa shot a glare that way out of the corner of her eye, she emotionlessly replied, "Bartha and Jeeda may be heading to the Sauti settlement, but there won't be any time for them to deal with you. Just behave yourself and wait for them to return."

"Even I know perfectly well that I shouldn't trouble the two of them at a time like this. I want to head to the Sauti settlement, regardless of my training as a hunter."

"For what purpose?" Ai Fa harshly asked back.

To that, Lem Dom almost whispered in response, “They have a lot of seriously injured hunters there, don’t they? I want to help treat them. To drive into my heart how dangerous and yet worthy of pride it truly is to be a hunter...”

Ai Fa kept on silently staring at the eyes beyond the window.

And in the face of that gaze, Lem Dom let out a small chuckle. “Besides, I have no way to get dinner other than helping Asuta with his work. I was able to earn a bit of food by helping out the Sudra and Fou while you were away at Dabagg, but this time you don’t even know how many days you’ll be gone for, right? So I’d like to come along to help with Asuta’s work too.”

“I do not have the right to decide that...” Ai Fa stated, calmly turning toward Moga Sauti.

As he stroked his pure white beard, the Sauti elder gently smiled back. “I heard tell of you from the people of the Ruu clan, Lem Dom of the Dom clan... I hesitate to ask for help from the Dom or Zaza clans, but there would be no harm in having you assist the injured men. I’ll discuss the matter with our clan head Dari Sauti.”

“Thank you. You have my appreciation, Sauti elder Moga Sauti.”

Just like that, it seemed it had been decided that Lem Dom would be accompanying us as well.

“Now then,” Moga Sauti said, adjusting his sitting posture, “All that remains are the Deen and Sudra women. I believe I’ll go talk to their clan heads after this to see whether or not they would be allowed to come into the care of the Sauti settlement alongside you, Asuta. I am truly, truly in your debt, Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa clan...”

After all our guests departed, Ai Fa and I were left alone for the night.

Having let her blonde hair down, Ai Fa called out, “Asuta.”

“Yeah, I know. I won’t do anything dangerous at the Sauti settlement. But this time, it makes more sense to be worried about you, right...?”

“I shall simply carry out my work, the same as always. No matter how large

the giba may be, that hasn't changed in the least."

"But this giba is so massive that even twenty hunters from the Sauti clan weren't able to take it down. The thing is practically a kaiju, isn't it?"

"Kaiju?"

"Ah, it means a big monster."

"No matter how huge and vicious it is, it's still a giba. It isn't a monster, just another child of the forest. And it is up to the forest to decide which of its children survive..."

As a hunter, Ai Fa wasn't about to rethink her life now. After all, she had to build up a firm resolve to look death in the face each and every day she set foot in the forest. That was what it meant to be a hunter of the forest's edge.

"Still, let me say just one thing, Ai Fa," I said, scooting my knees a bit closer to my clan head as she leaned against the wall. "I'll be waiting for you, trusting all the while that you'll safely return."

"Those words will grant me more strength than anything else ever could..." Ai Fa replied, her eyes narrowing as she gifted me with a very gentle smile. "I will return to you. So just like yesterday and today, have a delicious meal waiting there for me. That's all that I want."

2

The following day ended up being even more hectic than the last one.

First, since we didn't know how many days we would be leaving the house empty, we needed to transfer all of the ingredients in our pantry. Though with that said, we didn't have many excess vegetables since I headed into town pretty much every single day, and herbs and seasonings weren't all that bulky. The real hassle came from the giba meat.

In order to prevent it from spoiling, giba meat was pickled in pico leaves. That way it would last for half a month, but the pico leaves had to be stirred once a day because they absorbed moisture over time, so they couldn't just be left to sit.

Even moving all the meat to the midway point of the Ruu house's pantry took quite a bit of effort, since we were talking about hundreds of kilos worth. We ended up packing all the leather bags, wooden boxes, and cloth bundles we had in the Fa house full of pico leaves and loading them into the wagon. That alone involved some serious doing.

On top of that, even though it was the Ruu clan's day to prepare food for the inns, we still needed to use this time to do the cooking for the stalls. And since we had to prepare even more giba manju and poitan wraps than usual for today, there wasn't time for even a single moment's rest.

The women who lived in the area, Toor Deen and Lem Dom foremost among them, helped us out with that part of the job. And starting tomorrow, I would be asking the Sauti women to assist. Moga Sauti had already given his permission on that front, but I didn't know how skilled those women would be at cooking, so that remained something I had to be worried about.

While we were busy with that, Ai Fa headed into the forest. Since the house would be empty, there was no need to gather firewood. Instead, she was trekking deep into the forest to gather a large amount of giba summoning fruit.

Somehow or another we managed to get that all done, and afterward we loaded up our spare clothing, daily necessities, and cooking utensils into the wagon, then headed out from the Fa house even earlier than usual. Today, not just Toor Deen but also Ai Fa and Lem Dom were along for the trip to the Ruu settlement.

After dropping off our giba meat and excess luggage, we joined up with Reina Ruu's group and finally headed for the post town. Once we got there, we were going to have something extra to do today: expanding the outdoor restaurant.

Reina Ruu's group delivered the meals and fresh meat for the four inns, while we went to pick up the goods ordered from the carpentry shop and craftsmen. That meant two tables, twenty-two log chairs, the framework for a canopy, a leather tarp, and twenty sets of wooden plates and spoons.

Since we had ordered so many chairs, I had been concerned about whether it was really possible to finish them in a single day, but the carpentry shop's owner powered through and got the job done. The chairs alone were enough to

fill the wagon, so we ended up having to take two trips to carry everything.

After that, we picked up the stalls from The Kimyuus's Tail and once again headed for our assigned spaces.

The outdoor restaurant surrounded by the rope was there waiting for us, looking just the same as yesterday. There was no time for getting emotional today, though, so we went ahead and got set up. We set out the new seating in the freshly rented space, put up the canopy, and got to work preparing the food. By the time we were wrapping all that up, we had even more customers gathering in front of the place than yesterday.

Before long, it would be the upper sixth hour. That was around when Ai Fa, Donda Ruu, and all the others would be heading for the Sauti settlement, and it was also when we opened for business.

For today, the Ruu had prepared one and a half times as much giba hot pot stew as yesterday, or 120 meals. For the other dishes, we added twenty more meals for the time being, bringing the giba manju up to 120 and the poitan wraps to 140. However, we kept the Ruu clan's myamuu giba at eighty and our special dish, the giba cutlet sandwich, at thirty, since they cost a bit more.

Aside from those last two, most of our dishes were often ordered together with another one, which made it difficult to determine how much more of them we should make. And that went even more so for the giba hot pot stew, as a lot of the customers ordered the half-size serving.

Still, it wasn't difficult to measure the shift in overall sales. If everything sold out today, then the Fa clan's profits would go from 480 red coins to 550, and the Ruu clan's would jump up from 480 to 600.

With the two clans put together, that would mean going from 960 coins up to 1150... And for a rough estimate with the unit price set at three red coins, that meant going from 320 customers to 383.

That would mean a roughly twenty percent increase in the number of customers we were attracting. Considering we were talking about growth happening over the course of just two days, that really was quite the dramatic rise. The impact of the outdoor restaurant had been tremendous.

“At this rate, we might actually sell out of meals. I’ve never seen this many customers crowding around before,” Toor Deen said while cooking up the meat for the poitan wraps. She had had a gloomy expression on her face earlier in the morning out of concern for the Sauti clan, but now that she was working she looked just as lively as always. And since the Deen and Sudra clans had both given their permission, all of the chefs working here in the post town today would also be staying at the Sauti settlement. “The Ruu clan doesn’t seem to be having any issues either. In fact, I could see even a hundred and twenty servings of the hot pot stew still being too little.”

Regardless, their business seemed to be running smoothly.

They had fifty sets of tableware to go alongside the forty-two seats. That would give them some leeway in the collection and washing process, and there were always just two or three customers lined up in front of the stall now.

Though the seating was packed tight yesterday, there was now some latitude on that front too, after expanding to five spaces and seven tables. Even after upping the number of seats per table from four to six, the space still looked a lot more open. And even though it was Reina and Rimee Ruu’s first time with all this, they were still carrying out their work at a brisk pace.

“Hey, what’s going on here? We paid the same amount, but he got way more, didn’t he?” one of the customers complained.

When I looked around in surprise, I saw two westerner men with wicked-looking faces standing in front of the giba hot pot stew stall. They were the sort of ruffians that were a familiar sight around the Genos post town.

Rimee Ruu was standing behind the stall and dealing with them. The young girl had a log to stand on in order to make up for the height difference, and she was smiling away while holding up a metal ladle.

“That can’t be true. It just looks like less because the shapes of the plates are different! But they both have the same amount in them, so don’t worry about any of that!”

“Really? No matter how I look at it, I’ve got less.”

“I’m telling you, there’s no need to worry. We ordered those plates from a

number of shops, so they all have different shapes. But we use two scoops of this ladle thing here for one meal, and one scoop for a half size, so there really isn't any difference in how much you get," Rimee Ruu said, holding out the ladle toward the men. "Reina bought this metal ladle to measure out the amounts exactly while we're cooking! After all, with a wooden ladle, the shape can change a bit as it gets wetter or drier, so you can't really measure precisely with one of those!"



“O-Oh, really?”

“Yup! So it’s definitely fine! But if you’re that concerned, should I swap it out for another plate?”

“Nah, it’s fine. This guy here is just being embarrassing, you know,” said the other man who had remained silent the whole time, slapping his buddy’s robust shoulder. “If you’ve got a problem with it, you can trade with me. But don’t go troubling such a fine little lady.”

“Aw, shut it,” the first man replied with a frown, and then he scratched his head and said, “Sorry about that,” to Rimee Ruu.

“No worries, and thanks for the purchase. Come back again sometime, okay?”

As Rimee Ruu saw them off with a smile fixed to her face the whole time, the two men disappeared under the canopy.

Toor Deen had been leaning forward and watching alongside me, and she said in admiration, “That was amazing... I’m so timid that if someone complained to me like that, I probably wouldn’t be able to explain things properly.”

“You think? Well, I suppose your personality’s on the delicate side as far as women of the forest’s edge go,” I replied, recalling how at The Ramam Droplet back in Dabagg, Toor Deen had been trembling beside Myme after Ai Fa beat down those bandits. As she stared back at me now, she had a bit of a sad look in her eyes.

“I hardly ever even came to the post town before I started helping out with your work... After all, we didn’t need to, back at the Suun settlement...”

“Ah,” I replied, suddenly at a loss for how to respond.

Though the members of the main house had purchased fruit wine and whatever else they pleased, such luxury was not permitted for the branch houses, who just had to fill their stomachs with the fruits of the forest and the occasional giba they caught. There really wouldn’t have been much reason for them to come to town.

As I was thinking about that, Yamiru Lea reached out from the neighboring stall and gave Toor Deen a little poke in the head.

“Toor Deen, if you keep making that pitiful expression, you’ll drag my mood down with you.”

“Ah, s-sorry!”

“I wasn’t seeking an apology, but rather telling you to stop worrying over crimes that have already been forgiven,” Yamiru Lea chided, then she turned back to the customer who had just arrived.

As Toor Deen dejectedly shrugged her shoulders, I shot her a smile.

“It’s just as Yamiru Lea said. The path you all need to take is living properly as people of the forest’s edge, right? And you’re working your hardest day after day now, so I don’t see any need to worry about the past.”

“Right...” Toor Deen nodded back, adding some fresh meat to the tray.

Time kept on passing by like that, and eventually Yun Sudra and Ama Min Rutim showed up. I had finished my rotation at that point, so I had a bit of time to spare. I went ahead and walked over to the outdoor restaurant.

“How are things looking over here, Reina Ruu?”

“Ah, Asuta. Things seem to be going even more smoothly than expected. We have plenty of seating and plates, so it seems we haven’t been struggling as much as everyone did yesterday,” the second Ruu daughter replied with a truly satisfied smile. Since there were more than twice as many seats as the day before, things were even livelier. Even so, it didn’t seem like we were going to face any sudden commotions springing up.

“And I’m really getting a deep sense of satisfaction from doing this. Even though these townsfolk are not our brethren, seeing them so happy eating our dishes makes me want to try harder still to bring them greater joy... I doubt that I could ever feel any other way about it.”

“I see. Then it really was worth it to open this place up.”

“Yes,” Reina Ruu said with a smile.

But then, suddenly, her blue eyes took on a dubious look. At the same time, I sensed someone and turned around to see who it was, only to find a young man in a leather cloak holding a wooden plate with a sulky look on his face.

It was the young chef Roy from the castle town, dressed like a traveler to avoid being spotted by ruffians.

“This dish wasn’t made by Asuta, just you women of the forest’s edge, right?” Roy said before anything else, without so much as a greeting. “Let me see just how much skill you all possess.”

Reina Ruu didn’t say a word and just politely pointed toward the seating. As she watched Roy walking over there, she whispered into my ear, “What was that chef’s name, Asuta? I’ve forgotten again.”

“Huh? It’s Roy. I think that’s the third time you’ve been introduced now...”

“That’s true. I’m sorry for troubling you.”

As I thought to myself how sad that was, I turned my gaze to watch Roy.

He had ordered a full portion and hadn’t gotten any other dishes to go with it, so his plate was filled with plenty of giba hot pot stew. Since the hood on his cloak was up, it was difficult to track his expressions as he slurped the soup. But his spoon never stopped moving as he steadily ate the dish.

Guess there’s no point in me watching him.

I could just ask Reina Ruu what his impressions were later. With that thought in mind, I went to return to my own stall. However, before I could go, Roy turned my way.

“Hey...did you really have nothing to do with the making of this dish?” he asked me.

“No, I didn’t,” I replied with a shake of my head.

At that, Roy bit his lip and glared at the plate, which was still around eighty percent full.

“And you women didn’t receive instructions from Mikel either, did you?”

“We didn’t. All we learned from him was how to smoke meat and make dried milk.”

Roy’s hand gripping his spoon started trembling.

As Reina Ruu looked at him, she tilted her head a bit. “What is it that you’ve

been so fixated on? My comrade Sheera Ruu and I developed this dish, but Asuta was the one who taught us how to properly use tau oil and sugar in the first place. And he in turn learned those techniques from his father, from what I'm told. I believe it's rather hard for people to pull anything off with nothing but their own strength."

"I get that. I do..."

"Then why won't you ask Mikel to teach you? Is the fact that you're a chef in the castle town while he is no longer a chef at all causing your pride to get in the way for some reason?"

"That isn't it. I just..." Roy started to say something, but then he held his tongue.

Reina Ruu crossed her arms in front of her chest in a rather uncharacteristic manner, then sighed and said, "I just don't understand you. If something is bothering you, then shouldn't you be doing everything you can to resolve it?"

Roy offered no response to that, instead starting to chow down on the rest of his meal at an incredible speed. I worried the soup might have been too hot since it was still giving off steam, but in less than a minute he had finished it off and rose from his seat.

"It seems that Myme girl is planning to open a stall in the violet month," Reina Ruu called out, but Roy left without responding to that as well. With yet another sigh, she started washing the empty plate with water from the barrel.

"When I saw him acting so unsure of himself like that, I couldn't help but try to offer him some advice, even if it was pointless," Reina Ruu said before I could speak up. "Am I really that much of a meddler? If I am, I can't say I like that about myself..."

"No, I don't think it has anything to do with being a meddler," I replied. That said, I didn't know what had made her speak up either. Perhaps she had seen herself in how Roy was worrying about cooking. As I prayed that Roy would escape from his slump as soon as possible, I went ahead and got back to my own work.

We finished up business for the day without any other incidents of note.

If nothing else, though, I would say that the booming success we had was certainly noteworthy. Once again the giba hot pot stew had sold out ahead of schedule, and the other dishes, including the myamuu giba, were all gone before closing time.

“Still, I’d say that the novelty definitely played a part. At least nobody complained about us selling out so fast, but I’d like to keep the number of our meals at the same amount for tomorrow as well,” Reina Ruu stated.

I didn’t have any objections, but someone else did have a comment: Tsvai of all people.

“But shouldn’t we be looking at our menu while we have the leeway to do so? We may be fine for now, but I think we should consider selling another soup dish.”

“Another soup dish?”

“Yeah, that’s right. We’re preparing 120 of this dish, but most of the customers order the half size, don’t they? So over two hundred people are eating it,” Tsvai said with an unusually serious look in her eyes. “If that many people eat the same exact dish day in and day out, they’ll get sick of it sooner than the other dishes, right? Even more so once the novelty wears off.”

I felt seriously impressed, as I was thinking the exact same thing. If I had to give my assessment, I’d say the giba hot pot stew was currently being treated as a side dish, so even if the customers changed the dish they were pairing it with, that would still mean eating the same giba hot pot stew every single day.

“Right. Thinking about it, maybe we’ve been avoiding people getting sick of the dishes on offer at the inns because we’ve been alternating them. And it’s benefited us that there have been different groups of southerners and easterners coming by every few days or weeks.” Seeing how it didn’t seem to have clicked for Reina Ruu and the others yet, I expanded on my explanation a bit. “But at the stalls we get a lot of westerners who live here in Genos. They probably don’t want to keep on eating the same exact thing for a month or two straight. So with that in mind, they could end up tiring of it even quicker than the giba burgers or myamuu giba.”

“Then should we do as Tsuvai said and prepare another soup dish to alternate with it daily?”

“Yeah. If you can come up with something just as good as the giba hot pot stew, I don’t think we’ll hear any customers complaining. At the very least, there shouldn’t be any harm in doing things that way.”

Even though Tsuvai was the one who had objected to setting up the outdoor restaurant yesterday, just one day later she had already found a new means of earning coins. It certainly was reassuring to see.

“Right... And at this rate, it’ll eventually be difficult to prepare enough innards, so it may be good to come up with new soup dishes using ordinary meat next.”

As we continued our productive discussion, we finished cleaning up and headed back toward the forest’s edge.

Next came preparing to head to the Sauti settlement.

We had determined that each day our path should take us through the Ruu settlement along the way. There were a number of reasons for that, but foremost was the fact that the Sauti clan made use of that route whenever they needed to buy something in town regardless. In other words, it was the shortest way between the Sauti settlement and the post town.

As for trying to head directly from the Sauti settlement to the post town, apparently that would require exiting the forest’s edge to the south and then going farther out to the stone highway so they could follow it north. The route would take four hours on foot, or eighty minutes by topos wagon. But by staying within the forest’s edge and heading north to the Ruu clan first, that became two hours and forty minutes by foot, or a bit over fifty minutes by wagon.

Before they had topos or wagons, the Sauti clan hardly ever ventured into the post town, instead purchasing what they needed from the farm village to the south of the forest’s edge. But after getting ahold of a topos, they’d searched for the shortest route to the post town, and ended up settling on the one we were using now.

With that long preface out of the way, we returned from the post town to the

Ruu clan settlement, loaded up the luggage we needed, and a few people from the Ruu clan's side of the business swapped out, after which we headed for the Sauti settlement.

Since Sheera and Vina Ruu would be on stall duty next, they swapped places with Reina and Rimee Ruu, hopping into the wagon. The main prep work for business tomorrow would be handled by the group remaining at the Ruu settlement, so neither side really had a heavier or lighter load.

Until this whole commotion was settled, the Ruu clan would continue to prepare the food for the inns everyday. After all, it would have been a bit much for the Fa clan to handle without the aid of the Fou or Ran clans.

After around forty minutes of travel from the Ruu settlement by wagon, we arrived at the Sauti settlement. Since there was just one road between them, there hadn't been any worry of getting lost. And because the Sauti settlement was all the way to the south, there was also no mistaking it for anywhere else. If you just kept going south down the path through the forest's edge, you would eventually arrive there in the end.

"Thank you for coming, fellow comrades of the forest's edge... Welcome to the Sauti settlement," the elder Moga Sauti greeted us.

After hopping down from the driver's seat, I gave him a bow.

"We'll be in your care for the time being. Did the hunters head out into the forest on schedule?"

"Indeed. They devised a detailed plan and are currently out setting traps. As long as they aren't attacked partway through, they hope to start confronting the lord of the forest seriously beginning tomorrow."

There was a strange quiet hanging over the Sauti settlement. It was a big, wide place, in every way a match for the Ruu and Suun settlements.

"This settlement was built not only by the Sauti, but also the Vela clan that has long followed us. There are nineteen members of the Sauti and fourteen of the Vela, making thirty-three of our people living here in total."

"I see. And there are around sixty people under the Sauti altogether, from what I've been told."

“Indeed. In these past few months, several children have reached the age of five, bringing our total to sixty-eight at present.” As I recalled, the custom was not to include children under five years of age in such counts. “There are twenty-three hunters among them, but as a result of this incident two of them now lack the strength needed to carry on in that task. And the way things are going, we Sauti are not finished with suffering losses.”

“So from now on you’ll have twenty-one hunters needing to hunt enough giba to feed sixty-eight, right?”

That seemed to be a much lower ratio of hunters to mouths to feed compared to the Ruu clan. The Sauti must have had a lot of women, or perhaps children and old folks.

“Between the Sauti and Vela, we have fourteen women. We would like to have half of them help prepare dinner. Will that be enough?”

“That shouldn’t be any problem. I was thinking we’d start with our preparations for business tomorrow, and then get to work on dinner after.”

“Well then, allow me to lead you to the Sauti kitchen.”

As Moga Sauti led us over to the main Sauti house, I ran some calculations in my head. The Sauti and Vela together had thirty-three people. Then there were eleven hunters who had come to help, and us eight chefs. That would mean we would need to prepare enough dinner for fifty-two in total. That number was no problem for the eight of us just by ourselves, so it wouldn’t be difficult to do our work while also instructing the Sauti women. After thinking all that through, I turned toward Sheera Ruu as she led Ruuruu by the reins.

“By the way, how much has Mida been eating lately? I think I heard that he’s gone from enough for ten people to just five.”

“Yes, I believe he eats around enough for five now. After all, he is quite large.”

In that case, I would add enough for four more people, bringing us to fifty-six in total. And considering the hearty appetites of the Ruu clan, it would probably be good to just go ahead and bump that up to sixty.

At that point, I asked Moga Sauti, “Um, how many children under the age of five do you have who eat normal meals? And how many in the Sauti and Vela

clans are injured enough to have trouble eating normally?”

“There are four young children who have been weaned off milk, and three men who are injured enough to only be able to drink soup.”

Then, setting the children at half a normal serving, that would make for two more, and the injured folks would need a different meal, taking three off. I decided to set my plans at roughly enough for sixty people.

Food to cheer up everyone in the Sauti...and food to give the hunters strength, huh?

That said, there wasn't really a need to get hung up on making anything that special. The Fa and Ruu clans made use of the ingredients flowing out of the castle town, and that alone was enough to feel special here at the forest's edge. I would have to check on the condition of the injured folks later, but aside from that, we simply had to work diligently at cooking, just as always.

This is my first time cooking for another clan beside the Ruu or Rutim, outside of banquets.

These circumstances most definitely weren't anything to celebrate, but it still felt positive to me that we were given a chance to help the Sauti, with whom we hadn't been able to form deep ties as of yet.

And so, our several days of staying at the Sauti settlement finally got started.

3

We finished the preparations for the next day's business incredibly fast.

The Ruu clan had left the majority of that work up to the group staying behind, and on my end all I really had to do was cut up meat, so we didn't need that much time. Though we spent over an hour loading everything at the Ruu settlement and coming here, it all worked out since this was the time we usually allotted for our study sessions. Consequently, there were still three hours left until sunset.

Then, when it was finally time to cook dinner, one of the women summoned by Moga Sauti, who looked young yet also dignified, stepped forward and

bowed her head.

“I am truly grateful to all of you for sharing your strength with the Sauti. I am in charge of the women in the settlement, and I am Dari Sauti’s wife, Mil Fei Sauti.”

“I’m Asuta of the Fa clan. I’ll be helping to man the stove for a bit starting today.”

Just like Dari Sauti, she looked to be somewhere in her mid twenties. Her dark-brown hair wasn’t especially long and was pulled back tightly into a bun. She seemed like a rather strong-willed woman.

Behind her stood six women from the Sauti and Vela clans. They were a mix of all ages, and the only common point between them was the gloomy expressions they wore. Even the especially stout-hearted women of the forest’s edge could lose their strength when faced with a tragedy such as this. It was the first time since the clan head meeting that I had seen people of the forest’s edge looking so listless.

Out of the group, only Mil Fei Sauti was wearing an undaunted expression.

“So what should we do? If at all possible, I would like to feed the men who are injured first.”

“Right. It’ll be difficult for them to get tough food down, won’t it?”

“Yes. Especially for the two who are heavily injured—they don’t even have the strength needed to chew baked poitan and can only sip down broth... Our injured hunters are all currently gathered in one of the Vela houses, so I would like to prepare food for all of them at once.”

“There are seven injured hunters, right? Got it. Then we’ll start off by boiling giba meat. Sheera Ruu, could you go ahead and do what I asked you before?”

“Yes, understood.”

With that, Sheera Ruu started cutting up the giba meat and adding it to a boiling pot. As she helped out with that task, Mil Fei Sauti called out, “Excuse me, but...this is food for the injured men, isn’t it? No matter how soft you boil it, I don’t think they’ll be able to swallow giba meat.”

“Right. This is just to make a stock. We’ll move the boiled meat to our portions later. The plan is to make it a little easier to eat and also full of nutrition, so please don’t worry on that front.”

“I see. My apologies for the impertinent remark.”

While the meat was boiling, we diced up some aria, chatchi, and nenon into pieces roughly one centimeter wide. When I added them to the pot, Mil Fei Sauti again interjected, “Um, did you bring those vegetables with you? I don’t believe we had any chatchi or nenon here.”

“Yes, we bought them on the way back today.”

“Then we have to pay you for them...”

“No, I needed them for my work, so don’t worry about it.” Mil Fei Sauti dubiously furrowed her brow, but I just shot her a smile. “Moga Sauti asked me to comfort and give life back to the Sauti through my cooking, and I accepted that task. Besides, I’ve heard the Sauti aren’t as well off as the Ruu, so you can’t buy too many different ingredients.”

“Yes, that’s certainly true.”

“Then isn’t it only natural for me to provide ingredients personally in order to fulfill my agreement with Moga Sauti? I don’t believe I could carry out my task with just what you have in the Sauti pantry alone, so this is simply what has to be done.”

Mil Fei Sauti narrowed her eyes halfway and shot me a chilly glare. “That sounds like sophistry to me. In the end, aren’t you just taking pity on how poor we Sauti are?”

“I wasn’t trying to. I just want to do my job.”

As one of the three largest and most powerful clans at the forest’s edge, the Sauti naturally weren’t so bad off. But that was ultimately just relative to the smaller clans. Compared to the Ruu and the similarly powerful northern settlement, the Sauti were living quite modestly.

Since clans like the Sudra and Fou were selling giba meat through the Fa clan now, they were doing pretty well. Otherwise they would never be able to buy

ingredients like tau oil and sugar. Plus, recently we had started trying to periodically purchase meat from clans that were a bit farther away, like the Gaaz and Rattsu. Thanks to that, the small clans who supported the Fa clan's business were earning more money than the neutral Sauti at present.

From what I heard, there were only two or three types of vegetables in addition to aria and poitan in the Sauti pantry. It would be difficult to make the sort of cooking Moga Sauti requested with just that, and considering how they would be facing even greater poverty for a while due to how many of their hunters were injured, I really didn't want to go demanding coins for purchasing ingredients.

Of course, it was possible to cook delicious dishes with even just a pinch of salt. But everyone from the Sauti clan had been so beaten down that it was only natural to want to give them something a bit more luxurious.

"At any rate, this was all an agreement made with Dari and Moga Sauti, so if you have any issues, I think you should bring them up with those two."

"Very well..." Mil Fei Sauti replied with pursed lips. Dari Sauti was a very calm, gentle man, while his wife gave off quite the harsh impression in comparison.

"Well then, we still have some time left until the meat will be done boiling, so how about we get to work on the other dishes? You already boiled down the poitan, right?"

"Yes. We do three days' worth all at once here in the settlement...though since we'll be using so many today, we'll have to do it again tomorrow."

"Then you guys should keep handling the poitan. After all, it would take up a lot of time, boiling them down after getting back from work."

After that, we worked for a while on the ordinary soup dish and the side dishes.

For the soup, we went with a simple giba soup using tau oil. Around when that was mostly finished, we had a nice firm stock for the injured hunters. After moving the thoroughly boiled giba meat over to the other soup, it was time to work on the final preparations. "Now then," I said. "We'll be adding skim milk and fuwano, then a bit of tau oil and sugar as special ingredients, plus some

fried minced giba meat.”

“Skim milk?”

“It’s milk with the fat removed. There’s lots of nutrients in milk.”

“True. That’s only natural, considering milk is meant for raising children.”

As I weakened the flame on the stove, I added in the skim milk, and then turned toward Mil Fei Sauti.

“By the way, does the main Sauti house have an heir?”

“Yes, though he is still only ten.”

“Huh?! Ten years old?!”

“Yes. I married Dari at the age of fifteen and gave birth at sixteen. My younger children are seven and four.”

So that would mean Mil Fei Sauti was only twenty-six. That was a woman of the forest’s edge for you, having three children already at that age. It certainly explained the aura of dignity about her.

“All right, this should be completely done now. Would you mind giving it a taste test?”

At any rate, the dish was done. It was a karon milk soup with fuwano flour added for thickness.

The aria, nenon, and chatchi were all boiled to be tender enough that they didn’t need to be chewed. Since we got the stock from the giba meat and added fragrant minced meat as well, I expected its flavor to be abundant. We used fuwano rather than poitan for thickness because it would give it a smoother feel in the mouth.

Plus, between the meat, vegetables, carbohydrates, and karon milk, it would surely provide plenty of nourishment. At the very least, it would probably go down easier than if I had used lots of herbs from Sym that they weren’t accustomed to. And if it still turned out to be too heavy, I was prepared to improvise a different soup that would go down easy with my secret weapons: seaweed and smoked fish.

After having just a small spoonful, Mil Fei Sauti let out a wistful sigh. “This certainly is delicious... And I can sense plenty of the giba’s strength from it.”

“Right. The Sauti learned how to make minced meat from the Rutim, right? Adding it to soup can make it easier for sick or injured folks to eat,” I replied, feeling relieved by Mil Fei Sauti’s reaction. “Back in my home country the custom was to refrain from giving meat to people who were in a weakened state. But for the people of the forest’s edge, eating giba seems to give you the most strength in body and spirit, so I went with this dish.”

That was a thought I had arrived at through my experience cooking for Granny Jiba in the past. And when we were talking about hunters, they would probably have an even stronger desire for giba meat.

Mil Fei Sauti stared at my face for a while, then called over the women who had their hands free to carry the pot. It seemed she had acknowledged the dish as being suitable for the injured hunters.

“By the way, has Lem Dom been over with the injured hunters this whole time?”

“Yes. She has quite a frightening appearance, but she’s been admirably diligent in looking after the men.”

“I see. Glad to hear it. Now then, it’s finally time for the main dish, so—” I started to say, only to suddenly be cut off by women shrieking outside.

After freezing up for just a moment, we hurried out of the kitchen.

The women carrying the pot were frozen in place. Before them stood the reason for their surprised shrieking: the elite hunters with whom I was so incredibly familiar.

“Are you okay, Ai Fa?!”

“What are you making a fuss about? I’m not even injured,” Ai Fa said, her hunter’s eyes blazing bright. Still, she looked so awful that it reminded me of the day I first met Lem Dom. Her whole body was coated in dirt and her beautiful hair was disheveled.

Over half of the group was just as filthy as Ai Fa. And furthermore, two of

them were injured: Darmu Ruu and Rau Lea.

“What? My injuries are nothing serious,” Darmu Ruu stated, an even more violent look on his face than usual. There was a gray cloth wrapped around his left arm, and his vest was bloodied around the chest.

“Neither are mine! This is just to be on the safe side!” Rau Lea whined as Mida held him in a bridal carry. There was cloth wrapped around his head, and his long blond hair was dripping with blood.

“The lord of the forest charged us while we were setting up traps! It really was as massive as they said!” Dan Rutim chimed in while leaning on his cane, his eyes burning bright too. “My father Raa and I noticed it quickly enough for us to fully prepare to face it, and yet we still ended up like this! If it weren’t for Darmu Ruu and Rau Lea pushing themselves so hard, we would have had several more folks injured so badly they would never recover!”

“Are the Sauti and Vela men all right?” Mil Fei Sauti asked, her voice now lacking the calm from before as she stepped forward.

“Yes,” Donda Ruu replied. I could feel his hunter’s spirit radiating from his entire body. The reason the women shrieked earlier might have been because they were faced with the extraordinary intensity of these hunters of the forest’s edge. “At the very least, no one on their end was more injured than these two. They should all be returning home shortly.”

“I see... I cannot thank you enough for lending our Sauti clan your strength,” Mil Fei Sauti said, bringing her hands together and giving a deep bow. Standing beside her, I wiped the sweat from my brow.

The only ones who weren’t filthy were Dan Rutim, Raa Rutim, Jeeda, and Bartha. As Dan and Raa Rutim were in charge of searching while Jeeda and Bartha handled the bows, they must not have faced the lord of the forest directly. But everyone else was absolutely coated in dirt, Donda Ruu foremost among them. Though I couldn’t spy any injuries on the others, they were probably coated in scratches and bruises beneath their cloaks.

Even when the beast was faced with such elite hunters, this was still the end result. Though Ai Fa had denied it, that massive giba really was a monster.

“Asuta, hurry up and get dinner ready for us! I’ve got to stuff myself to make up for all the blood I lost!” Rau Lea wailed from Mida’s arms. “And tomorrow, we’ll take down that cursed lord without fail! I won’t let it end like this, damn it!”





The sun was about half set by the time we had finished preparing the dinner Rau Lea had demanded.

I and some of the others had been invited to the main Sauti house. Adding up all the guest hunters and chefs, our group totaled nineteen, with around half of them staying here and the other half splitting off and heading to the house of Dari Sauti's younger brother.

There were six members of the main Sauti house: the head, Dari Sauti; his wife, Mil Fei Sauti; his grandfather's younger brother and the clan's elder, Moga Sauti; and three children.

As for us guests, the hunters included Donda Ruu, Darmu Ruu, Ludo Ruu, Mida, and Ai Fa, and the chefs consisted of me, Sheera Ruu, Vina Ruu, and Toor Deen.

"I'm truly grateful for your efforts. Were it not for all of you, our Sauti clan would have surely lost a great many more hunters," Dari Sauti stated from the head of the group before dinner. Though he didn't seem as worked up as yesterday, he looked to be in an even worse state physically. He had a laceration on his head and a fractured left arm, and was apparently still relying on herbs to numb the pain and reduce his fever. "I also cannot help but be impressed anew by how dauntless you Ruu hunters are. It was truly amazing how you were able to face the lord of the forest head-on and not suffer serious injuries."

"Yeah, that was one heck of a giba. Absolutely crazy. No matter how much we slashed at it, it didn't seem to care at all and just kept on charging us. It even shrugged off a blow to the head from Mida's club," Ludo Ruu chimed in as he fidgeted restlessly. "There really are all sorts of things I'd like to discuss, but could we save it for after we eat? We're all starving here!"

"Of course. My apologies. Well then, let us regain our strength through the meal that the chefs all worked so hard to prepare."

With that, Dari Sauti gave the premeal chant, which everyone repeated.

Once that was done, Ludo Ruu scooped up a plate and said, "Now, it's time to

dig in! It's so awesome that you made giba cutlets for us tonight, Asuta!"

"Uh-huh. Back in my home country, we had a custom of eating cutlets when facing a serious competition because their name is the same as our word for winning."

"Sounds like a great custom to me!"

And so, the main dish for tonight had ended up being giba cutlets. Since the plan had been for their actual hunt to begin tomorrow, I had chosen this dish with that superstition in mind.

We also made a giba soup with tau oil, and we went with a shredded tino, aria, and pula salad with dressing. For the sides, there was also some boiled spinach-like nanaar, and a potato salad-esque dish made from chatchi.

"But you already ate the soup that was prepared in advance, didn't you? Can you really eat such a heavy meal?" Mil Fei Sauti asked, shooting her husband a firm look.

"Of course," Dari Sauti replied, smiling for the first time in a while. "Ever since I ate that odd style of giba cutlets in the castle town, I've been wanting to try the normal kind as soon as I could find a chance. If I let this opportunity pass by, the regret would slow my healing process, for sure."

"My," Mil Fei Sauti replied while furrowing her brow, but she didn't end up saying anything further.

As for the other hunters, they were all silently chowing down. While I was also keeping my mouth working, I looked around at the members of the Sauti clan, and saw the eyes of the young children shoot open wide as they ate giba cutlets for the first time. They whispered to one another as they moved on to the soup and pecked at the appetizers, their small faces all filled with mirth. Meanwhile, Moga Sauti's eyes narrowed as he watched over them.

"What's going on here?! This chatchi salad is totally different from what I ate before!" Ludo Ruu loudly called out, causing me to look back over his way.

"Ah, I switched out the mamaria vinegar in the mayonnaise for the stuff from Banarm. It looks a bit different from before too, doesn't it?"

“Yeah, it’s a bit redder than before! And really, really good!” Ludo Ruu sure did seem to love chatchi, judging by the way he was eagerly stuffing his cheeks with chatchi salad. He shot a smile at the young children sitting across from him. “Aren’t you all going to have some too? If you wait too long, I’ll eat it all up before you get the chance.”

“Huh? Y-Yeah...”

“Asuta and the others make some real delicious food, you know. You should all eat as much as you want and grow up to be great hunters like Dari Sauti.”

The young children looked bashful, but they gave shy smiles nonetheless. Though many of the hunters gathered here were the silent type, thanks to Ludo Ruu the atmosphere wasn’t becoming awkward.

As I was thinking about that, I heard a concerned, “Hey...” from Vina Ruu on my left. “I know that you’re hungry, but shouldn’t you eat a bit slower?”

Apparently those words had been directed at Mida, who was right across from her.

As the large youth gulped down the giba cutlets he had been shoveling into his mouth, he replied, “Hmm... But I’m just so happy. I haven’t eaten Asuta’s cooking for a long time...”

“Oh, my, so the food prepared by us women in the Ruu clan isn’t enough to satisfy you after all? How sad...”

“That’s not what I meant...”

“Oh? In that case, what did you mean?”

Since they both had a tendency to speak slowly, their conversation went at a pretty leisurely pace. I chuckled a bit, and Vina Ruu shot me a glance out of the corner of her eyes.

“What...? Is there something stuck to my face, perhaps...?” she asked.

“No. I was just noticing how you’re able to talk with Mida normally now,” I whispered back so that Mida wouldn’t hear. In the past, just coming face to face with him was enough to cause her to feel faint. Of course, they had been seeing each other a lot more since Mida had become a member of the Ruu clan, so

that over-the-top reaction must have naturally softened. However, I hadn't had a chance before now to see her acting quite so friendly toward him.

Vina Ruu gave a shrug of her seductive shoulders, then whispered into my ear with warm breath, "We've lived together for months now, so of course I've grown used to him... And besides, Mida's lost quite a bit of excess weight, hasn't he?"

"That's true," I replied, but when I stole a glance over at Mida I still thought he looked abnormally huge. He had seemed a bit down up until the start of dinner over the fact that Yamiru Lea and Tsvai were eating elsewhere, but now he looked downright blissful.

Even if Mida was still just a hunter in training, he was apparently chosen for the elite unit because of his monstrous strength. And from what I could tell, he seemed to be quite happy about that too.

"By the way, Dari Sauti, I actually have a proposal," I went ahead and called out, figuring it seemed like a suitable time to do so.

Dari Sauti had portioned off a small amount of giba cutlets to really savor, but he calmly looked my way and replied, "What is it?"

"This may go against the customs of the forest's edge a little, so I think you should consult with Donda Ruu, but...could we deliver food to the other clans under you as well, starting tomorrow?"

"The other clans? You mean for those who aren't injured?"

"Yes. I know that customs state the chefs and members of a house are to eat dinner together in the same place. But today we prepared food for everyone in the Sauti and Vela clans and had them eat in their own houses, so I figured maybe it would also be okay to deliver food to the other clans."

"But besides the Vela, we Sauti also have the Don, Fei, Dada, and Tamur under us, with a total of thirty-five people among those four clans. Can you truly prepare food for all of them?"

"If we're just talking soup, then it wouldn't be difficult at all. We can have each house cook up their own meat and poitan, then we would just provide a soup dish full of nourishment. What do you think?"

Dari Sauti furrowed his brow, looking somehow pained.

“But we Sauti no longer have the strength needed to ever repay such a debt...”

“There’s no need to repay anything. Just, if another clan runs into trouble down the line, I’d be glad if you would lend them a hand in turn,” I said, looking at Dari Sauti and Donda Ruu. “Didn’t Gazraan Rutim already say that the people of the forest’s edge shouldn’t just value blood ties, but show greater care and affection for all their comrades? If the folks from the Don, the Fei, and all the rest are hurt and suffering just like everyone from the Sauti and Vela clans, then I’d like to lend them at least a bit of strength. And that’s not just my opinion. All eight of us chefs who came here think the same way...”

“We just agreed to the proposal you came up with, though...” Vina Ruu chimed in with another seductive shrug of her shoulders.

As he glanced over out of the corner of his eye, Donda Ruu snorted, “Hmph.”

“Chefs are to entrust their lives to those who eat their food, and vice versa... The custom of eating in the same place is meant to show that resolve. As long as no one makes light of that, it shouldn’t earn the forest’s anger regardless of where one eats,” Moga Sauti stated, turning his calm gaze toward Dari Sauti.

Dari Sauti firmly shut his eyes, then placed his right fist on the floor. “Our Sauti clan does not doubt the intentions of the Fa or Ruu in the least. As head of my clan, I place the lives of my people in the hands of your chefs.”

4

The dinner at the Sauti settlement came to a smooth close, and the visiting women cleared away all the tableware and pots. The three young children returned to their respective rooms, leaving just Dari and Moga Sauti in the main hall along with us guests.

“Now then, I’d like to hear more details about today’s hunt. What do all of you think after actually facing off with the lord?” Dari Sauti asked.

Ludo Ruu jumped in first. “Man, that giba was unreal. It’s the first time I’ve ever seen one that my old man, Darmu, and I couldn’t take down, even working

together! Jeeda and Bartha shot a ton of arrows into it, and Ai Fa and Gazraan Rutim slashed at its neck and back too, so how is that thing even still alive?”

“Because its pelt, fat, and meat are so thick that arrows and blades cannot reach its vital points. It was like trying to thrust a blade into hard ground,” Ai Fa replied after having remained silent all throughout dinner.

After hearing that, Donda Ruu spoke up. “Ludo, starting tomorrow, you’re joining Bartha’s group.”

“Huh? But why?! Having the two of them on bows should be plenty, right? And the bows did even less than the swords, didn’t they?!”

“That’s because we were aiming at the wrong place. Starting tomorrow, just focus on its right eye.”

“Its right eye?”

“That’s right. It’s already lost its left eye, so if we can take out its right eye too, that should do a lot to restrict its movement.”

“Really? But when we faced it, I believe it had both eyes,” Dari Sauti interjected.

“Yeah,” Donda Ruu nodded. “It was a fresh wound, and from a blade at that. It was probably inflicted by your hunters yesterday. So that accomplishment belongs to all of you.”

“If that is the case, I suppose our efforts were at least somewhat rewarded...”

“As such, we’ll start by attacking that weakness. If we can steal away its vision, that should make our use of giba summoning and warding fruit even more effective.”

“Tch! I wanted to be in the group going in with swords. I know Dan Rutim said he wanted to take a swing at it tomorrow too.”

“Don’t be a fool. We won’t be bringing that thing down unless everyone carries out their tasks. A nose to sniff out giba and a bow to take out its eyes are more important now than a single blade,” Donda Ruu shot back, taking a swig of fruit wine. “Besides, a blade swung with those thin arms of yours wouldn’t be able to take its life anyway. So if you understand that, then just be quiet and

prepare your bow.”

“Hey, Ai Fa’s arms are even thinner than mine, so why not have her handle the bow?”

“Ai Fa will be handling the giba summoning fruit tomorrow. She can’t do that while also hiding and shooting arrows, now can she?”

When she heard that, there was a shine in Ai Fa’s blue eyes. “Donda Ruu, I have a proposal on that front.”

“I get the feeling you’re about to spout off some nonsense too.”

“You may well see it that way, Donda Ruu... I was thinking that after I place giba summoning fruit in the location decided upon for the traps, I should also coat myself in the aroma. What do you say?”

I felt myself about to reflexively shout something out in shock.

However, Donda Ruu just shot Ai Fa a quiet, blazing glare. “You would perform sacrificial hunting when there are this many hunters around?”

“That’s correct. Normally, this would be no place to do so, as a giba that smells giba summoning fruit loses all reason and becomes even more vicious. And it’s possible that it may enrage them even more when that aroma is mixed with the scent of a human.”

“Then why do such a thing?”

“Please, allow me to finish. Think back to what Dan and Raa Rutim said before dinner, about how the lord smelled of fury from the very start. It charged at us, even though it was alone, not fearing even such a large number of people. It had already gone mad before having ever smelled a giba summoning fruit... With that in mind, performing sacrificial hunting shouldn’t increase the danger it presents.”

Donda Ruu was just silently glaring at my clan head as she explained.

“Besides, no matter how carefully we lay our traps, it could still end up just charging straight ahead as it did today. But if I coated myself in the scent of giba summoning fruit, it would make the lord’s movements easy to predict.”

“But then it’d keep on chasing after you, wouldn’t it? That’d be dangerous,

right?” Ludo Ruu chimed in.

However, Ai Fa shook her head and replied, “No. If I devote my efforts solely to fleeing, I won’t be caught by a giba so easily. Even more so if it has lost its vision. And if I sense any danger, I can swiftly climb up a tree where its horns cannot reach.”

“I get the feeling that thing can knock over any tree it pleases.”

“If that happens, then I’ll simply leap to another tree. It’s true that I have the least strength to swing a blade out of anyone in this group, so I believe that this is how I can be of the greatest use.”

Donda Ruu remained silent for a while longer. All the other hunters didn’t say a word either, simply waiting for his decision. But in the end, it was Donda Ruu’s other son who broke the silence.

“What’s the harm? She’s always treating her own life lightly anyway,” Darmu Ruu stated. The second Ruu son’s wolf-like eyes remained piercingly fixed on Ai Fa. “We Ruu hunters would never treat a life so frivolously, though, so we just need to finish the lord off before its tusks dig into her.”

“Hmm, it’s not quite convincing hearing that from you, Darmu. I mean, you’re always worrying about other people, aren’t you? And getting hurt protecting them...” Ludo Ruu teased, but Darmu Ruu’s gaze didn’t shift away from Ai Fa.

As she calmly stared back, my clan head opened her mouth.

“I have no intention of treating my life lightly. I simply am trying to choose what I feel is the best path forward... And I believe that with the full strength of the Ruu hunters, there isn’t a giba alive that cannot be taken down.”

“Are you truly confident that you can escape even with the lord chasing after you?” Donda Ruu grumbled.

“Of course,” Ai Fa replied with a firm nod.

“Then we’ll work that into our plans. It’s a job that only you can carry out,” Donda Ruu stated, even more strength behind his voice than usual. “Dari Sauti, your clan has techniques for guiding a giba using giba warding fruit, right?”

“Yeah. It’s essentially similar to sacrificial hunting. You coat your body in the

scent of giba warding fruit and drive the giba toward wherever you want.”

“In that case, all the remaining Sauti hunters should coat themselves in that scent and drive the giba to the hunting grounds. Dan and Raa Rutim will assist with that,” Donda Ruu said, and then he glanced over at Ludo Ruu. “You should take care of any giba driven there with your bows first. Aside from the lord, we need to eliminate as many giba in the area as possible then and there so they don’t mess with the traps.”

“Yeah, there’s sure to be lots of other giba besides the lord drawn out. That actually sounds like it might be a pretty fun job.”

“I’ll take care of whatever’s left, along with Darmu, Gazraan Rutim, and Rau Lea. You two should act as if you have no job at all until the lord appears,” Donda Ruu stated, directing that last bit toward Ai Fa and Mida. “When it does show up, we’ll aim for its legs instead of its torso. If we slow its movements down even a little that way, the traps we set should be more effective. But if it makes it through the traps, then it’ll be your turn...”

“Understood,” Ai Fa acknowledged.

“Yeah...” Mida said.

“You’re the only one who wasn’t sent flying when facing it head-on, Mida. We’ll add some metal spikes to your club for tomorrow, which should allow you to crack the lord’s skull open if you aim for its head.”

“Okay... I’ll try my best...”

“Still, there’s no telling just how badly we’ll have to injure the lord in order to stop it. It may just keep on rampaging even if its legs are broken and its skull cracked. If that happens, then we’ll be counting on your resolve,” Donda Ruu said, his eyes fixed on Ai Fa. “If the lord survives this formation we have laid out, then you will guide it back to us again. Then our blades will strike true and take its life.”

“Very well,” Ai Fa replied, looking remarkably calm and composed.

As he stared back at her, Donda Ruu took another swig of fruit wine and stated, “If every one of us puts their full strength into the task, there is no question that we will be able to take down the lord of the forest. And we will do

it without any of us losing their lives. Our honor as hunters of the forest's edge rests upon this."



"You look as if you wish to say something, Asuta," Ai Fa called out, leaning up against the wall as always in the small room, which was only about eight square meters or so.

The room was located in a Vela branch house. On the other side of the wall, Bartha and Jeeda must have already been asleep.

Sitting down directly in front of my clan head, I listlessly nodded, "Yeah..."

"What is it? If you have something to say, then say it. Don't keep it to yourself. Isn't that the promise that we made?"

"Ah, rather than wanting to say something, it's more like I'm thinking about how tough my position is."

"I don't really know what you mean. What are you so worried about?"

"The fact that no matter what danger you may be facing, all I can do is trust in you and wait."

Ai Fa tilted her head a bit, looking confused. It seemed she really didn't understand what I was thinking at all.

"It's about the sacrificial hunting. You're the one who brought it up, so I know you're sure of yourself. And I know better than anyone that you aren't the sort to treat your life lightly."

"Right."

"So worrying too much would be like proof that I don't trust in you, right? But I do trust you, and yet I still can't help it."

"I can't say I understand. It's only natural to worry about a member of your house," Ai Fa said with a shrug of her shoulders as she let down her long hair. "It's fine to worry while trusting in me. That's the role of those who wait for their house's hunters to return."

"You sure do make it sound easy," I replied with a deep sigh, only for Ai Fa to

break out in a smile while staring back at me.

“Even so, you are in fact trusting in me, and worrying about me too. I’m more than happy enough with that, Asuta.”

“Right, got it. Then it was worth it to stop myself from saying, ‘Don’t do the sacrificial hunting,’ no matter how much I wanted to.”

“Yes, you should swallow any such words that try to slip out,” Ai Fa said with a chuckle, elegantly brushing up her golden hair that was dangling down. “Today, I was once again reinvigorated by your cooking. Next time we encounter the lord of the forest, we’ll surely take it down. With the strength of Donda Ruu and everyone else on our side, there’s no reason to fear.”

“Yeah. Thinking about it that way, it really is amazing, all of you going out together on a hunt.”

“Indeed. Over the course of today’s hunt, I gained a thorough sense of just how strong the Ruu hunters are,” Ai Fa said, letting slip a sigh of satisfaction. “Gazraan Rutim, Ludo Ruu, Darmu Ruu, and Rau Lea—they’re all incredibly capable hunters. And out of all of them, without a doubt, Donda Ruu... He’s every bit as great of a hunter as my father was. I feel proud, knowing that such a remarkable man is one of our leading clan heads.”

“Hmm. Hearing you say that, and thinking about how strong your dad must have been for someone from a small clan, it’s really impressive.”

“Of course he was. After all, my father Gil was the greatest hunter in all the forest’s edge,” Ai Fa childishly retorted, which I couldn’t help but find incredibly adorable.

At any rate, Ai Fa didn’t seem to be feeling any fear or hesitation whatsoever. Even though I was pretty sure Donda Ruu hated the dangerous technique of sacrificial hunting, he didn’t try to reject her proposal. That just showed how much he trusted in her strength, as well as how far they would have to go in order to take down the lord of the forest.

With that in mind, I had no choice but to trust in Ai Fa, Donda Ruu, and everyone else, even as I worried about them. Ultimately, all I could do was have a delicious dinner waiting for them to show my appreciation for their efforts.

“Well then, shall we get to sleep in preparation for tomorrow?”

“Right,” I nodded back.

But right then there was a great commotion that you certainly wouldn’t expect at this time of night from outside the window.

Actually, that might have been overselling it. It seemed to be more like a man and a woman trying to keep their voices down while having an argument. After sharing a brief glance, Ai Fa and I gently crept over to the window.

Under the pale moonlight, a tall man and a slender woman were standing in the space between our house and the neighboring one. With my eyesight, the most I could make out was their silhouettes. But from their voices, I could tell that it was apparently Darmu and Sheera Ruu.

“So just what exactly is it that you’re trying to say? If you’ve got some sort of issue, then come out with it clearly,” Darmu Ruu stated, sounding blatantly annoyed.

When she replied to him, Sheera Ruu’s voice was obviously pained and sad. “I don’t have any issue. I just want you to be safe, Darmu Ruu.”

“That isn’t how it sounded to me. You were practically telling me to head back to the Ruu settlement, weren’t you?”

“That’s not true... I simply said that I wanted you to watch out for yourself and not just the others.”

“So are you saying I’m so inexperienced I don’t even know how to protect myself?”

“No, that’s not it. But not that long ago you were injured protecting Shin too...”

“What, that again? How long do you intend to keep bringing up that old story?” Darmu Ruu questioned, sounding even more irritated. But as he drew in closer to Sheera Ruu, he seemed to rethink things and came to a stop. “Sheera Ruu, it’s not in your nature to go complaining to a member of the main house. I at least understand that much.”

“Right...”

“But sometimes you say stuff I just don’t understand. Stuff that irritates me. And I don’t have a clue why that is.”

Sheera Ruu didn’t say anything in response.

“I’m sure you’re dressing up your words because you’re so timid. But there’s no need to worry about who’s in the main and branch houses, so if you have something you want to say then just come out with it clearly.” Though Darmu Ruu’s voice sounded just as irritated as always, there was also something about it that I didn’t usually sense. It was as if there was something vexing him, or he was feeling troubled...

Then in the next moment, he sounded totally astonished.

“What in the world are you crying about?”

With my eyesight, I wasn’t able to pick up on Sheera Ruu’s expression. From what I could tell, she seemed to be staring up at Darmu Ruu’s face.

“I’m sorry. I just...felt a bit happy, is all.”

“Happy? What do you have to feel happy about?”

“It’s just...you listened so seriously to what I had to say, and tried so hard to understand what I meant... I’m sorry, it seems I can’t put it into words properly.”

“I don’t get it at all. Anyway, just stop crying already.”

“Right,” Sheera Ruu nodded back, and then it looked like she wiped away her tears.

Darmu Ruu, meanwhile, was scratching his head.

“At any rate, I’ve got no intention of treating my life lightly. Rau Lea and I only got injured because we happened to be positioned to take the brunt of the blow from the lord of the forest. If Ludo or Gazraan Rutim had been in our place, they would have ended up injured instead.”

“Okay. I’ll choose to believe your words there... And I’ll be praying with all my heart that you return safely again tomorrow.”

“That’s only natural for a woman of the forest’s edge,” Darmu Ruu sulkily

replied, giving a deep sigh. I suspected that was probably the first time I had ever seen him sigh like that. “You’re done crying, right? So hurry back to your room already. Vina’s probably getting suspicious around now.”

“Yes. Please, get plenty of rest for tomorrow.”

And with that, the two figures disappeared from our field of view.

As I stepped back from the latticed window, I once again exchanged a glance with Ai Fa.

“Umm...even if it was unintentional, did we just commit the crime of peeping?”

“It isn’t as if we hid our presence, so it is no crime. They were at fault for not noticing,” Ai Fa said with a frown. “That second son of the Ruu really does need to train his heart and mind more. It’s unforgivable, making a woman like Sheera Ruu shed tears.”

“Oh, right, you took a liking to her, didn’t you?”

“Indeed. If I were a man, I would prefer a modest woman like...” Ai Fa started to say, only for her mouth to suddenly shut as she shot me a glare.

“What? I didn’t say anything.”

“Quiet, you,” she grumbled, plopping down on the spot, and then lying down on her side. “I’m going to sleep. You should get some rest too. You can use the bedding there.”

“Huh? Ah, no, you’ve had a much rougher day, so you should use the bedding to get the most restful sleep you can.”

Though the room was snug, there was still a single set of bedding prepared. It was a situation that reminded me of our time back at the Rutim house, but we really couldn’t share it this time around. I felt relieved that Ai Fa agreed on that front, but I also didn’t feel like just leaving her there and using it for myself.

“Don’t worry about me. You used more of your strength than usual today, didn’t you?”

“That’s nothing compared to a hunter’s work, so I’ll leave it to you instead.”

“So persistent...” Ai Fa stated as she shot me a glare out of the corner of her eye while still facing the wall. “Will you not listen to your clan head’s orders? You use the bedding.”

“You’re the one being stubborn. I know that you would be happier using it.”

“Really...”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“I see. Perhaps I was mistaken.”

Ai Fa suddenly rose and turned, facing me as I stood there. Then, she abruptly grabbed hold of my collar, crossed the room, and sat down atop the bedding. Naturally, since she still had me in her grip, I ended up sitting there too.

“A-Ai Fa?”

“At the Rutim house, we slept together in the same bedding. If we are to act as we have up until now, then we should do the same again tonight.”

“No, no way! There’s no need to force ourselves to do that!”

“Why is it a matter of forcing anything? There haven’t been any changes to the bond we share. So it isn’t right to try to distance ourselves,” Ai Fa replied as she lay down atop the bedding.

As I gazed at the smooth contour of her back, I couldn’t stop my heart from pounding. Since there was a wall behind me, the only way to escape this predicament would be to climb over her...and my stubborn clan head would surely never allow that.

“Asuta.”

“Yes?!”

“Get to sleep already. We need our rest.”

“Right...” I replied in resignation, finally lying down. If I huddled up against the wall, I could just barely avoid touching Ai Fa.

I lay there with my body perfectly straight, just staring at the beams along the ceiling. Meanwhile, I could vaguely sense the warmth of Ai Fa’s body just a short distance away. And that faint warmth was enough to make it so I couldn’t

relax in the least.

“This won’t do...”

“Huh?”

I could sense Ai Fa turning around to face my way. I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye while still facing straight upward.

With her blonde hair draped down over her cheek, she was staring at me while childishly biting her lip.

“I don’t feel at ease with our backs to one another. It’s as if I’m sleeping with a giant madarama snake.”

“What, so I’m a madarama now?”

“I need to keep my eyes on you like this in order to be sure that isn’t the case.”

“You can’t sleep with your eyes open, can you?”

“As long as I feel at ease, I can sleep. But you shouldn’t worry about that. Get some rest already.”

“As if I could sleep with you staring right at me like that! Shouldn’t we just do whatever is best for the both of us to sleep soundly? We each have important work to do tomorrow, after all.”

My eyeballs were feeling tired, so I turned my whole head toward Ai Fa. Since she was only twenty centimeters away or so, her graceful face was reflected even more clearly in my eyes.

“No...this really is how we should be,” Ai Fa replied, suddenly breaking out in a smile. Somehow, it looked as if all the tension had drained from her shoulders. “It brings me joy, being able to sense you so close. That feeling hasn’t changed in the least.”

“Right...”

“I can feel a bit of tightness and pressure in my chest, but it’s just a part of how precious you are to me.”

A tightness in her chest, huh?

Was Ai Fa's heart beating faster and faster the way that mine was?

Imagining that made me feel more than a tightness, almost a difficulty breathing...and so I stopped worrying about it.

I couldn't carelessly touch her. And yet, I wanted to be as near to her as possible. I guess we had maneuvered our feelings for each other into a complicated and precarious tangle, in a way that would probably seem incomprehensible from the outside looking in.

At any rate, I tried to relax and release as much tension as I could from my whole body and shot Ai Fa a smile.

"Well, let's try as hard as we can to get some nice carefree rest. How about we make it a competition, to see who can fall asleep first?"

"What in the world are you saying?" Ai Fa said with a little chuckle, half closing her eyes.

I went ahead and turned my whole body her way, similarly letting my eyelids droop.

Though I didn't expect that I would be getting to sleep for a while yet, this moment we were sharing was filled with bliss beyond even what we normally felt around each other.

Chapter 3: The Lord of the Forest

1

Our first night at the Sauti settlement had come to a close without any problems.

We got up alongside the rising of the sun, cleaned the tableware and cooking implements used for last night's dinner, gathered firewood and pico leaves, and set about getting things ready for doing business.

The Ruu clan's group departed early to return to their settlement. Splitting up like this would normally have complicated the process, but the route we were going to have to take to the post town went through the Ruu settlement anyway, so there was no issue with them heading there first. Our two groups separated, planning to join back up later.

Meanwhile, it was crunch time for the Fa clan group. Toor Deen, Yamiru Lea, Yun Sudra, Lem Dom, and myself needed to work with the Sauti and Vela women to prepare 140 poitan wraps, 120 giba manju, and 30 giba cutlet sandwiches. Since we were leaving the cooking for the inns up to the Ruu clan, we couldn't exactly ask them for help with this too.

The only part we managed to complete yesterday was cutting the meat and preparing the sauce for the poitan wraps. Plus, aside from finishing that up, we needed to bake enough poitan for several days in one go, and it all had to be done in a mere two hours.

"Well then, like we planned yesterday, Toor Deen and Yun Sudra, can you prepare the giba manju, and Lem Dom, can you bake the poitan? I'll take care of the giba cutlet sandwiches, and I'll ask you to help me, Yamiru Lea."

Toor Deen and Lem Dom took part in this work every single day, so they formed small units with the Sauti women and gave them instructions. Yamiru Lea was the only one doing so for the first time, which is why I had her assist me, and we started off by frying the cutlets. Since it was only enough for thirty

meals, it wasn't much work at all.

Once that was finished, we joined up with Toor Deen's group to work on the giba manju. Since we could only rely on the Sauti women for mincing the meat and cutting the vegetables, that left our more skilled hands to make the paste and form the fuwano dough.

Then, once things looked like they had progressed enough, I took the baked poitan from Lem Dom and completed the giba cutlet sandwiches. That meant adding the sauce to the cutlets once the oil dripped off, adding some shredded tino and the two pieces of baked poitan, then putting them all in a wooden box so they wouldn't fall apart. The poitan wraps would be cooked on site before being sold, so they were ready as soon as the poitan were baked. We loaded it all into the wagon alongside the bags stuffed with meat and the containers of sauce.

We finished up by having everyone form the giba manju by wrapping fuwano around the paste. We were running right up against the time limit by that point.

Yamiru Lea gave a sigh as she loaded some completed giba manju into a steaming basket. "Your normal schedule had you cooking for the inns every other day on top of everything we just did, correct? It truly is difficult to even imagine."

We usually met up with Yamiru Lea at the Ruu settlement, so this was the first time we had her help out with the prep work. I met her exhausted expression with a bright smile.

"The Fou, Ran, and Sudra clan members who usually help out are all accustomed to the work, so it isn't too tough. And you can see how skilled Lem Dom is now too."

"I'm sure there's just as big of a commotion in the Ruu settlement every day as well. It's fortunate that I didn't get recruited."

At any rate, the dishes were complete. After thanking Mil Fei Sauti for helping lead everyone, we hurriedly departed for the Ruu settlement.

Things seemed to have gone smoothly on their end too. However, since their main hunting force was absent, they ended up with less than half their usual

number of giba yesterday. If this continued, the stock of innards would end up running out before long.

“Well, it should be possible to get ahold of those innards if we ask our subordinate clans. But still, I’ll be praying that my father and the others can finish the job safely as soon as possible,” Reina Ruu had said as we parted.

When we then arrived in the post town, business once again seemed nice and lively.

Fortunately, the number of customers we had wasn’t dropping off at all. Sure enough, the novelty didn’t seem to have worn off over the past two days. Rather, it was possible that the positive reputation we were still building up was drawing even more attention.

Still, Ama Min Rutim and Yun Sudra would both be working with us from the beginning of the day to the end, so that gave us plenty of leeway. Perhaps this was just the correct number of staff to have when business at the stalls was at a high point. I took some time to consider if it would be smart to stick with this lineup even after our duty at the Sauti settlement came to a close.

As all those thoughts were running through my head, the owner of The Great Southern Tree, Naudis, stopped by for the first time in a while.

“Hmm, this certainly is delicious. It seems that giba offal is every bit as good as ordinary meat.”

Apparently, there was a great deal of discussion about the outdoor restaurant at his inn, and so he came to check it out personally. I was able to step away from work for a bit, so I took a moment to thank him in place of the busy Sheera and Vina Ruu.

“Still, this dish comes from the Ruu clan, doesn’t it? Do you not plan to offer a soup dish at your stalls, Asuta?”

“Well, I’d like to expand the menu eventually. Though instead of another type of soup, I was thinking more of a dish that needs to be served up on a plate.”

That way, there wouldn’t be any clashing with the Ruu clan. Besides, if we also went with a dish that could come in half or full sizes, then it could be ordered alongside the soup. And that would expand the variety of options on

our combined menu even further.

“Hmm. In that case, there’s something I’d like to request of you.”

“Huh? What is it?”

“If at all possible, I would like you to sell giba curry at your stalls as well.”

That was certainly an unexpected proposal. Though I did want to see how well curry sold with my own two eyes, it was already being offered at four inns, so I was worried that if I went too overboard with it there was a risk people could get sick of the dish.

“The giba curry is selling fairly well even at my inn. But, unsurprisingly, there’s no shortage of customers from the south who see it as a Sym dish and avoid it.”

“Right. So is it only your customers from the west ordering it?”

“Half of them are westerners, the other half easterners, and then just a few southerners, I’d say.”

“Ah, right. You’ve had some easterners visiting The Great Southern Tree for the giba cooking, haven’t you? Their numbers still haven’t dropped off even with so many inns offering giba meat now?”

“Well, not to boast, but out of all the places that serve giba meat, mine has the widest variety. The Sledgehammer in particular is a real small inn, so my place gets quite a few easterners who can’t make it in there.”

The Sledgehammer seemed to be flourishing in its own way too. And that was something I was very grateful to hear.

“Personally, though I have blood from Jagar, I’m still a citizen of the west who has devoted his very soul to Selva, so I have no intention of discriminating against any of my customers, even ones born in the east. But still, I want my inn to be a place of relaxation and refreshment for my customers from the south... Those are the customers I want to please the most with the dishes I serve.”

“Yes, I understand how you feel.”

“However, the giba curry just isn’t selling as well as the other giba dishes. After all, the majority of my customers from Jagar think that it’s a Sym dish. But it’s actually a dish from your home country that just uses a lot of herbs from

Sym, correct?”

“That’s right. I believe customers born in Sym find it pretty unusual as well.”

“I think it would be good if it was better known around here that the dish came from you, a person of the forest’s edge and visitor from overseas,” Naudis said enthusiastically while slurping giba hot pot stew. “This dish uses tau oil and sugar from Jagar. But rather than being a Jagar dish, it comes from the forest’s edge. Your people are using ingredients from both Jagar and Sym, treating them equally. If all of this becomes more common knowledge, then it should change the way people see giba curry too, as a dish of the forest’s edge rather than Sym.”

“I see. It’s a way to change people’s thinking without saying anything directly, right?”

Naudis nodded in response to my smile.

I considered his proposal. “In that case, I’ll see what the other inn owners think and decide what to do from there. But the Ruu clan only just opened this restaurant, so I imagine we’ll at least wait till things calm down first.”

“Well, it’s not as if there’s any need for you to open another place right away. However, it’s not long till the sun god’s revival festival. And that’s not an opportunity that anyone who makes a living through sales can overlook, now is it?” Naudis solemnly stated. “This matter regarding the giba curry is ultimately just my own personal desire, so I leave the decision up to you. But even if that isn’t what you go with, I still believe you should expand your business. There simply isn’t going to be a better opportunity to let the world at large know how delicious giba truly is, after all.”

“Huh. That many people visit Genos for the revival festival?”

“Yes, that’s right. Even at a low estimate, I would say the number of customers to the stalls and inns should more than double. In fact, my place will be hiring people and running a stall just for the event.”

“More than double, huh?”

That was incredible. After all, our stalls from the forest’s edge were currently seeing between three and four hundred customers daily. And even though we

had only just expanded the outdoor restaurant, if we had that many customers crowding the place, we would end up exceeding capacity again. With that in mind, we needed to expand the number of seats we had for at least the duration of the festival. And that might also mean the Fa clan could prepare a new dish in turn.

“Got it. That’s some valuable information. Thank you. I’ll keep it in mind while I’m trying to figure out the best path forward.”

“Ah, not at all. After all, we’ve been acquainted for several months now and I would like this relationship to continue, with both of us finding success together.”

Naudis was probably my most trusted business partner. Of course, I did have my emotional attachments to him and others, but even beyond that, I felt that he and I could trust and respect one another more when it came to business, even when compared to Milano Mas, Nail, or Yumi. Not that I was dissatisfied with that in any way. Rather, I was proud to have such a relationship with an experienced businessman like Naudis.

Naudis departed after that, and business carried on peacefully, if at a pretty fast clip, until wrapping up for the day.



Once business was done for the day, we returned to the Sauti settlement.

As for the Ruu women, Reina and Lala Ruu swapped in for Sheera and Vina Ruu. To kick off our next round of work for the day, we went ahead and started preparing the food for the clans under the Sauti.

“Sorry, but could I ask you to do the prep work for the soup, Reina Ruu? Toor Deen should have a grasp on the amount needed.”

“Understood. Are you heading somewhere, Asuta?”

“I’ve got to borrow the outdoor stove to prepare the curry base to be sold.”

Currently, we were selling the curry base to four inns. All together, it only added up to around a hundred meals’ worth, but that still made for quite a bit each day.

Grinding and roasting the spices was something I generally had the women of nearby clans help out with, preparing a large amount at once. What I had to do today was take those and make the final curry base with them.

With Yamiru Lea as my cooking assistant, we started by chopping up the ari. Then we would sauté them in milk fat along with the spices, and finally add some fuwano. The process itself wasn't tricky, but it still took a fair bit of effort to make enough for several days all at once.

As I heated up all those spices in an iron pot, women and children from the Sauti and Vela clans started gathering from all around. It was only natural that folks would be curious, considering the powerful aroma we were spreading through the air. I wanted to let them know that there was no need to worry, but since they were just staring from a distance, they weren't quite close enough for my voice to reach.

"Asuta, just what is all this commotion about?" the elder Moga Sauti eventually called out.

As I added the fuwano to the spices and roughly stirred with a wooden spoon, I replied, "Ah, this is part of the preparations for our business. Sorry for being such a nuisance with the smell."

"I wouldn't say that it's especially unpleasant...but it is indeed a powerful aroma, certainly. I'd imagine it would keep the lord of the forest away from the settlement without even the need for giba warding fruit," Moga Sauti said with a smile, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

"If you don't mind, how about we serve this dish for dinner too at some point? We already unveiled it at a Rutim clan celebration, and it seemed to be fairly well received."

"Hmm, how interesting. Are these perhaps herbs from Sym?"

"Yes. They were purchased from the castle town."

"I see... Somehow, my body seems to crave that aroma," Moga Sauti replied, starting to stare off into the distance. "You know, I've also had the thought that we Sauti must have lived together with tolos in the olden days. After all, they feel so oddly familiar, and the men are all able to ride them without any

difficulty. Perhaps that's because of the blood from Sym sleeping inside of us."

"Ah, you're talking about how it's said the people of the forest's edge could have blood from both Sym and Jagar running through their veins? I've heard that apparently people from Sym are especially skilled at handling totos, yeah."

"Indeed. And it seems that some amount of Sym words and customs remain here at the forest's edge. The fact that those customs existed despite our home having been the black forest of Jagar may well be proof that we have Sym blood," Moga Sauti said, his smile growing more and more clear. Somehow, that expression reminded me of Granny Jiba. "Though I have lived for seventy years, I don't know anything of our time in the black forest. It burned down ten years before I was born, after all... Our ancestors were born of mixed Sym and Jagar blood in the black forest, and now we hunt giba on Selva land. Fate can be a truly strange thing, when you think about it."

"Now that you mention it, it's like you all tie Sym, Jagar, and Selva together. That's my honest viewpoint, though I feel bad for Mahyudra getting left out," I replied, recalling my conversation with Naudis from earlier in the day.

As he stared back at me, Moga Sauti once again smiled. "Up until just a few months ago, we had no ties with the citizens of any of the kingdoms. Both we and those other people avoided one another, breeding nothing but bad blood. But you helped to properly reforge those bonds, Asuta."

"Right. And it wasn't just thanks to me, but also to Donda Ruu, Gazraan Rutim, Ai Fa, and so many others."

"But you were the first one to start tying them all together, Asuta." Moga Sauti beckoned over the children watching from a distance, and placed his wrinkled hands atop their small heads. "And now, you're also bringing our Sauti clan into that loop. I am truly grateful, from the bottom of my heart."

"That's because Dari Sauti decided to rely on clans like the Ruu and the Fa that he didn't have blood ties to," I replied to Moga Sauti with a smile as I transferred the completed curry base to a specially made large plate. "But it would make me glad if we've succeeded at becoming friends with the Sauti... I've got to get to work on dinner after this, so I hope you look forward to it, okay?"

That last bit was directed at the young children. And in response, they all smiled and nodded. “Yeah!”

Around two hours had passed since the hunters returned from the forest. Though the sun was pretty far west by this point, there was still nearly an hour left until sunset.

The hunters had been greeted with surprise and shouts of admiration. Though they hadn’t taken down the lord of the forest, they had instead returned triumphant with an abnormally large number of giba.

“We exhausted our strength hunting all these down, so we returned before encountering the lord. We’ll need to skin them now as well,” Ai Fa had told me while holding a giba that looked a fair bit heavier than she was. Between the eleven hunters, they were carrying six giba in total. That meant that everyone else was carrying them in pairs, tied to poles.

Still, according to their recounting, these were just the giba that they had successfully bloodlet without the pelt getting ruined, whereas for the others they just cut off the horns and tusks and discarded the rest.

“Then there’s the share that’s going to the Sauti branch houses and subordinate clans as well. It felt foolish to keep counting at some point, so I really couldn’t say how many giba we took down in total.”

“I counted them! We brought back eighteen giba, and tossed aside another thirteen!” Dan Rutim loudly chimed in. As the injury to his ankle still wasn’t fully healed, he was naturally empty handed. “Ugh, why did I have to get injured at a time like this! I want to swing my blade alongside my comrades!”

“Are you actually saying that just the eleven of you managed to hunt down thirty-one giba on your own?” Mil Fei Sauti muttered in amazement, having also come out to greet the hunters.

As he looked down at her, Donda Ruu replied in a displeased voice, “All we did was finish off the giba that the Sauti hunters directed our way. Between the sixteen Sauti hunters and our group of eleven, we were twenty-seven strong, so I can’t see anything to act so surprised over.”

“But less than ten of you hunters were swinging your blades, correct?”

“Even so, this is the result of everyone’s strength coming together. That’s precisely why we split the horns, tusks, pelts, and meat equally,” Donda Ruu answered, sounding somewhat annoyed. “Besides, no matter how much vitality we have, it would never be enough for us to keep hunting with these methods. If the lord of the forest doesn’t appear within a few days, our strength will run out. This is nothing to be celebrating about.”

As an outsider looking in, I thought they all seemed to be brimming with strength, but the burden on them had to be quite severe. No matter how efficient their hunting method might have been, twenty-seven hunters taking down thirty-one giba was an extraordinary haul.

On top of that, Ai Fa and Mida had been waiting deep within the trap-filled hunting grounds, and they ended up having to wield their blades against a horde of giba that came charging from an unexpected direction. Though sacrificial hunting was dangerous, as it made giba lose their sense, Mida was poor at chasing but good at handling the beasts head-on, so they were able to take several down without any significant risks.

“This is the first time I’ve ever hunted so many giba...” Mida said, his thick lower jaw trembling happily. Ai Fa also looked relieved that the sacrificial hunting she had chosen to use hadn’t led to any misfortune. As for me, I couldn’t help but feel awed at the thought of Ai Fa and Mida working together to intercept a swarm of giba.

As I was imagining that, Ai Fa stepped in next to me, only for someone else to come running over.

“Are you okay, Ai Fa?! There’s so much blood on you!”

When I heard that, I turned to look for the voice and found Yun Sudra clinging to my clan head. With a dubious furrowing of her brow, Ai Fa looked down upon the smaller girl’s pale face.

“It isn’t anything to worry about. This isn’t my blood, it’s the blood of the giba.”

“Ah, I see. My apologies. I guess I lost my composure there.” Yun Sudra placed

a hand over her own chest and gave a big sigh. When she saw that, Ai Fa's brow furrowed even deeper.

"Why were you so shaken up, Yun Sudra? You didn't seem that disturbed when the members of the Ruu clan were injured yesterday."

"Huh? Well, the Ruu and their subordinate clans are all fellow people of the forest's edge, but the Fa and Sudra are friends, so I couldn't help but feel shaken," Yun Sudra replied, her cheeks turning noticeably red. "The thought of you being hurt makes me feel the same as I would if a member of the Sudra were injured, Ai Fa. And I will be praying that you can continue to safely carry out your work in the days to come."

"I see... You are a kind person, Yun Sudra," Ai Fa quietly replied.

"Oh, not at all," Yun Sudra said back with a bashful smile.

As he glanced over out of the corner of his eye, Donda Ruu declared, "Time to tidy up these giba."

2

For dinner that night the main dishes were simply steaks and hamburger steaks, then for the soup dish we had a giba soup prepared with tarapa, and the side dishes consisted of a stir-fry using four varieties of vegetables and mushrooms, plus a salad made with the daikon-like sheema.

The main and soup dishes were chosen to further improve the skills of the Sauti women who had already learned cooking techniques from the Rutim, while the vegetable dish was picked to emphasize novelty and nourishment.

For the vegetable stir-fry, in addition to the aria, I used ingredients purchased from the castle town, specifically the zucchini-like chan, arugula-like ro'hyoi, and paprika-like ma pula. I also went extravagant with the mushrooms, using the ones that were equivalent to shiitake and cloud ear mushrooms. For flavoring I used tau oil, sugar, chatchi starch, and a number of herbs to give the dish a distinctive taste.

The sheema salad was accompanied with a dressing made from dried kiki, which was akin to a sour plum, making for a refreshing dish.

And finally, we had enough giba soup to serve everyone, with some being delivered to the four clans aside from the Sauti and Vela. It was a simple dish with a tarapa and myamuu base, but I also employed a little of each of the familiar aria, chatchi, and nenon, as well as the three more unusual vegetables from the stir-fry. I figured hopefully that would be enough to lend everyone at least a little strength.

“It’s all delicious. Even more so than your dishes I tasted in the castle town, I’d say,” Dari Sauti said. His fever had finally come all the way back down, so he was once again able to eat normally.

As for the rest of the injured, the two who suffered especially severe injuries could still only slurp soup with minced meat, but the other four had recovered enough to at least eat half a serving of normal food.

“Your cooking has brought the Sauti and Vela a great deal of comfort, Asuta of the Fa clan,” Mil Fei Sauti whispered to me after dinner, during the break after cleaning up. “And I’m certain the members of the Fei, Don, and all the others feel the same. I was somewhat doubtful about how much use it would be to summon not just hunters but also chefs, but it seems that was an embarrassing misjudgment on my part.”

The look on her face remained just as taut and strict as always, but Mil Fei Sauti’s words seriously helped me feel at ease.

Since there was no new discussion for the day during dinner, everyone ended up hurrying back to their own houses...but just as I was about to step into the Vela branch house where I was staying alongside Ai Fa, Barthia, and Jeeda, a voice called out to me from behind.

“Asuta, could I have just a bit of your time?”

It was Yun Sudra.

Without thinking, I turned toward Ai Fa, at a loss as to how I should reply. My clan head just shot back, “Don’t be out too late,” with her eyes half-closed, before swiftly disappearing beyond the door.

“What is it? Is it something business related?” I asked, hoping that it was, as I faced Yun Sudra standing there under the moonlight.

“No, that isn’t it. I just wanted to express my gratitude to you.”

“Your gratitude?”

“That’s right. By working alongside you, I’ve been able to see all sorts of things. And I was able to learn how even someone like me could lend my strength to my comrades. If I had just remained in the Sudra house all this time, I surely never would have started thinking like I do now,” Yun Sudra said with her hands joined together as she gave me a passionate stare. “Those members of the Sauti who lost their strength have been joyously eating our cooking and steadily getting better. I can’t imagine what would make me feel more proud than that.”

“Yeah, I’m really glad to see it too.”

“Thank you so much. You’re everything I aspire to be. And I want to keep serving under you for as long as I live.”

“Ah, Yun Sudra...” I started to reply.

However, she cut me off by saying, “No, that’s not what I meant. I simply meant as a chef. Someone like me wouldn’t make a suitable wife for you, Asuta.”

Yun Sudra had finally gone and said the word “wife.”

As I felt sweat run down my back, I stared at her smiling face.

“But I only just turned fifteen. People won’t start pestering me to get married until I turn sixteen or seventeen. I wish to keep polishing myself until then, so that I can become someone worthy of marrying you.”

“Yun Sudra...” I called out.

However, once again she cut me off, saying, “No, I understand. There is no place for me in your heart as things stand. But even so, I intend to keep clinging to that faint hope until you take another woman as your bride.”

“Yun Sudra... Did you talk to Raielfam Sudra?”

“No. I haven’t discussed this matter with my clan head at all. But I can tell how you feel even without hearing it said. After all, no one out there is trying to win your heart as hard as I am...aside from one person, that is,” Yun Sudra

replied, then broke out in a smile. “I have no chance of winning against such a wonderful woman. However, that doesn’t mean I can just stop thinking about you, Asuta.”

“Yun Sudra...” I repeated, sounding like an idiot.

“However, I definitely won’t lose to any women aside from her. I’ll become strong enough for that, at least. So please, allow me to continue to stay by your side from here on out... I love you, Asuta.” Still smiling, Yun Sudra moved away from me. “If the time comes when you are united with someone you care for, then I’ll wish you the greatest happiness imaginable, from the bottom of my heart. I’m sure I’ll sob myself to sleep that night, but then I’ll start searching for a husband for the sake of my clan. And the Fa and Sudra will continue to be friends forevermore even afterward.”

With that, Yun Sudra disappeared into the darkness.



As I looked up at the pale moon I forced down the whirling emotions in my chest and knocked on the door to the Vela house.

Just like yesterday, a Vela woman holding a candlestick guided me to the same room as before, where I found Ai Fa already atop the bedding, lying down with her back to me.

This time around, my clan head was up against the wall. Silently, I laid myself down beside her. As she had performed sacrificial hunting for the first time in a while, there was an almost alluringly sweet scent clinging to her body.

“So you’re back, Asuta?”

It seemed she wasn’t asleep after all.

As I looked up at the beams along the ceiling, I replied, “Yeah.”

“Do you have anything to tell me?”

“Yeah, I think there’s just one thing I need to inform you of.”

“Very well. Go ahead and say it.”

“Yun Sudra knows everything. And she said that she wanted to respect my feelings.”

“I see...” Ai Fa murmured, still facing the wall. “That girl really is something...”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

“Whoever marries her is sure to be unbelievably happy.”

“Yup, I think so too.” As I sensed Ai Fa’s scent and warmth right next to me, I gently closed my eyes. “When Yun Sudra gets married, I’d like to wish her the best too.”

Unsurprisingly, Ai Fa only said “I see” in response.

And so, our second night at the Sauti settlement gently passed on by.

3

The lord of the forest didn’t appear the next day either.

Perhaps because of the massive haul of giba from the day before, the forest was supposedly very quiet. But even so, they still managed to hunt down nearly twenty giba in total.

“With so many giba cleared out, the lord of the forest should come back in high spirits. After all, the blessings of the forest are abundant in this area now,” Donda Ruu said.

The hunters had returned a bit early again today, and as for us chefs, thanks to the Sauti women getting accustomed to the job, we were able to finish dinner with time to spare.

Once all our work was done, we took a break while waiting for sunset, during which I finally got a chance to talk with Gazraan Rutim. We hadn’t seen each other in a while, and even up to this point we hadn’t really had a chance to catch up as friends.

“What is it? You look as if something’s worrying you, Asuta.”

I figured maybe the emotions from the incident with Yun Sudra last night were showing on my face, but I still shook my head. “No, I’m fine. Actually, I’m sure I should be worrying about it *more*.”

“If there’s ever anything I can do to help, please, don’t hesitate to ask,” Gazraan Rutim said with a warm smile.

We were standing off to the side of the plaza located in the center of the settlement. There was a faint purple veil cast over the world around us, and I could hear wild birds chirping. It was probably only around half an hour before dinner at this point.

“Are *you* doing okay, Gazraan Rutim? Even if you aren’t injured, you’ve been working much harder than usual these past few days, right?”

“That’s true. But I’m a hunter, so I feel a lot more self-fulfillment from this work than I do when having to deal with the nobles of Genos. Though I’m sure I’ll have to worry about that again too, eventually.”

“Do you mean if some noble is hatching another plot like Cyclaeus?”

“No. Just being involved with the nobles and townsfolk is an ordeal in and of

itself for the people of the forest's edge. Since we avoided one another for eighty whole years, that's a difficult matter to work around," Gazraan Rutim said, once again smiling. "Still, that doesn't mean it will all be painful. And the same is true of this hunt for the lord of the forest. When you think about it, just living is an ordeal in and of itself, but joy and satisfaction are also a part of that, I'd say."

Gazraan Rutim somehow seemed as if he had grown even more calm and composed after becoming the Rutim clan head. He had reminded me of a large tree with roots running deep into the ground to begin with, but now he was like the forest or the mountain itself.

"It seems the Ruu clan's business is earning quite the reputation as well. That will surely tie the people of the forest's edge and the townsfolk together even more strongly than before. And it's all thanks to your strength, Asuta."

"That's not true at all. You people of the forest's edge accepted someone like me, so I'm sure you'll all be able to get along with the townsfolk and nobles just fine."

It was then that two figures approached, both thin for hunters: Ludo Ruu and Rau Lea.

"What are you two talking about, looking so laid-back? If it's something interesting, then let me join in too." Though Rau Lea was injured on the first day, he had already regained his strength by the next. However, he did have a gray bandage wrapped around his blond-haired head. It was a deep enough laceration that it needed stitches.

"I don't know if you'd find it interesting or not," I said. "We were discussing the future of the forest's edge. What do you think about it?"

"The future of the forest's edge? We hunters just need to take down giba, while you chefs prepare us delicious meals. Who cares about the rest?"

"Yeah, that sounds about right for you, Rau Lea."

"Hey! Don't go talking all high and mighty when we're the same age!" Rau Lea shot back as he angrily put me in a headlock.

As he watched us go, Ludo Ruu chimed in, "Come on... Rimee and Sheera Ruu

were on duty today, right? Where did that runt get to?"

"If you're looking for Rimee Ruu, she was in the kitchen chatting with Ai Fa. Those two don't normally get that many chances to talk, after all."

"Got it. Well, you don't exactly see someone all that often if you don't live in the same settlement," Ludo Ruu said as he crossed his arms behind his head. "Granny Jiba's been wanting to see you and Ai Fa too. You pass through the Ruu settlement every day, so you should at least stop in and say hi."

"Ah, I figured if I went on my own it wouldn't be fair to Ai Fa."

"Not really. And anyway, Ai Fa should visit the Ruu settlement more too. Granny Jiba and that runt Rimee would love to talk to her more often."

There was such a peaceful feel in the air that it was hard to imagine everyone was in the midst of the serious task of trying to take down the lord of the forest.

After finally letting go of my head, Rau Lea snorted, "Hmph! Now that I think about it, it's pretty rare getting to see folks who aren't even members of the same clan every single day. It's been kinda fun, like every day is a banquet."

"Ah, and we get to eat even better dinners than usual too. Honestly, I've been enjoying it, just a bit," Ludo Ruu added.

"Yeah, and it's been great hunting together with folks from the Ruu, Rutim, and Sauti clans all together for the first time too!" Rau Lea said, then he turned my way. "And Ai Fa! She's seriously an amazing hunter! She should be in even more danger than we are because she's using giba summoning fruit, but she hasn't been injured at all!"

Ludo Ruu nodded. "She couldn't hunt down giba all on her own every day if she wasn't that skilled. She's one heck of a hunter."

"Yup! I'll definitely have to beat her in the contest of strength at the next festival of the hunt! You guys will be there, right Asuta?"

"Huh? Ah, I haven't heard anything yet so it's still undecided."

"No way! She can't just quit while she's ahead!"

Finding it amusing how worked up Rau Lea was getting, I started to smile. "In that case, go ahead and make a proposal to Donda Ruu. Watching the contest

of strength would be tough on my nerves, but I'd love to participate in the festival."

"Then that's just what I'll do! Where is Donda Ruu?!"

Gazraan Rutim offered an answer. "Donda Ruu was discussing something with my father Dan and Dari Sauti. Can you wait until after dinner to talk to him?"

"I see. I'll have to make sure I remember to tell him... Hmm? What's she doing on her own?" Rau Lea questioned, peering out into the twilight. When I turned to look too, I found Tsuvai slowly walking along in the center of the plaza.

Gazraan Rutim nodded and started walking that way, and we followed after. "Is everything all right, Tsuvai?"

When asked that, the young girl turned and shot Gazraan Rutim a harsh glare. "What? I can't see any reason for someone like you to be worrying about me."

"Is that really how you should be talking to your clan head?" Rau Lea questioned, his eyebrows rising.

"It's fine," Gazraan Rutim interjected, keeping him in check. "This task will surely end tomorrow or the day after. Please, keep giving your all until then, Tsuvai."

"How can you say that...? Nobody knows when that huge lord of the forest will show up again, right?"

"Giving you a full answer would require a detailed explanation on the behavioral patterns of giba, but at any rate, I believe it will appear within the next few days. And when that time comes, we shall put everything we have into taking it down."

"Hmph..." Tsuvai muttered, staring down at the ground. Though she wore the same sour expression as always, I couldn't help but feel that she looked somehow dejected.

"Tsuvai's worried about Oura, who was left back home," Gazraan Rutim explained as he met my gaze. "Though Tsuvai and Oura are both in the care of the main Rutim house, right now everyone aside from Oura is away, so she's currently staying with a branch house."

“Ah, I see.”

Gazraan, Dan, and Raa Rutim all came here to the Sauti settlement as hunters, while Tsuvai and Ama Min Rutim did the same as chefs. And the youngest daughter, Morun Rutim, was still at the northern settlement, so everyone but Oura really was away from the main house, sure enough.

“Oura’s been fully recognized as a member of the Rutim clan, right? So there’s nothing to worry about.” However, Rau Lea then mercilessly added, “Besides, your bond as mother and daughter has been severed, right? If you keep on worrying about Oura like that, you’ll never be given the Rutim name.”

“Shut your mouth! I don’t want to hear anything from you, when you went and gave away your clan name the very day you welcomed someone in!”

“That was because Yamiru is a strong woman. She probably has the same deep feelings you do and thinks of her former family all the time, but she does an amazing job acting resolute and not letting it show. You should learn from her example and become strong too.”

Tsuvai remained silent as she continued hanging her head.

As he looked down at her, Gazraan Rutim gave a relaxed smile. “Tsuvai, we’re not telling you to cast aside your feelings for Oura. We simply want you to feel just as strongly that those of us in the Rutim clan are family too. When that time comes, as clan head I’ll grant you the Rutim name.”

Tsuvai didn’t say anything in response.

“You’re still young, so it may be difficult for you to think that way. But I believe that someday you will. And I want to show you and Oura as much affection as I do Morun and Ama Min too.”

At that, Tsuvai once again snorted “Hmph...” and left. As he watched her go, Rau Lea tilted his head.

“She seems to be especially stubborn, even for a former member of the main Suun house. Rather than trying to teach her through words, wouldn’t it be quicker to give her a smack on the rear?”

“I’m not so sure. But I want to guide my clan member using my own

methods.”

“Right, since you’re the Rutim clan head! So go ahead and do as you please.”

As they were having that exchange, Sheera Ruu and Ama Min Rutim approached from the main Sauti house.

“Asuta, I was thinking it was about time to heat the soup back up. What do you say?”

“Ah, yeah. Well, I’ll see you all later.”

After saying farewell to those three dependable hunters, we headed over to the kitchen.

“Have you two been in the kitchen this whole time?”

Ama Min Rutim nodded. “Yes. I was talking with Mil Fei Sauti. You were in the main house, weren’t you, Sheera Ruu?”

“Ah, no, I was having a conversation off to the side of the house,” Sheera Ruu replied, bashfully casting her gaze downward. Neither Ama Min Rutim nor I were ill-mannered enough to ask just who exactly she was talking to. It seemed that everyone was spending this break in their own different ways.

On our way to the kitchen, we passed by Moga Sauti and Raa Rutim having a quiet conversation, and Yamiru Lea was talking to Mida as well. Then there were Ai Fa and Rimee Ruu, Toor Deen and Lem Dom, and Yun Sudra and the Sauti women, all deepening their relationships.

It might have been true that life was ultimately a series of ordeals. But if the moments between could be spent close to the people you held most dear, you could surely face up to any such challenge. And that seemed especially true for the people of the forest’s edge.

Even the deeply weakened Sauti clan would surely someday be able to regain their strength, which was a thought that brought me great joy.

And so with that in mind, I once again felt incredibly proud that the people of the forest’s edge had accepted me as one of their own.



For that night's dinner, we went with a spare rib teriyaki and cream stew, bacon and nanaar milk fat sauté, an attempt at making something similar to a Caesar salad, and a tarapa sauce pasta, which was making its debut.

"Whoa, it's all wiggly!" the young children of the main Sauti house excitedly declared when trying out the unusually shaped spaghetti for the first time. Rimee Ruu, who had come to the settlement for the first time, was the one who taught them the proper way to eat this dish. Since she didn't have many relatives close to her age back in her own settlement, she seemed to be really enjoying herself.

"This pasta dish certainly is strange. I still can't believe it's made from poitan," Dari Sauti said, sounding impressed in spite of the fact that he had eaten this dish already in the castle town. Seeing him with his bandages was still a painful sight, but his face looked less emaciated now, and his facial hair was now cleanly shaven. His large frame looked to be as full of vitality as before too.

"To be precise, it's a mix of poitan and fuwano. And I used kimyuus egg too."

"Now that you mention it, you got some black fuwano from that noble who came from Banarm, didn't you? You didn't use that in this dish, did you?"

That question had come from the unexpectedly well-informed Ludo Ruu. He must have heard about it from Reina Ruu or something.

"I didn't, but I think I could make something pretty interesting by mixing that stuff with poitan too. Anyway, Welhide should be staying in Genos for a while, so I'll take my time tackling it."

"We've just been relying on you and interfering with your work..." Dari Sauti said with an apologetic look.

"No," I replied. "I think working to live up to the expectations of nobles is important too, but it's nothing compared to lending aid to comrades in need. I believe I've placed everything in an appropriate order of priority, and I'm taking care of my tasks one by one."

"Yeah, that's right, you should be focusing on giving us delicious food instead of bothering with those nobles and townsfolk," Ludo Ruu opined.

As more days passed by, the feeling in the air around dinner at the Sauti

settlement only seemed to be growing more and more harmonious.

Out of everyone gathered here, Donda Ruu alone still wore a serious look on his face. It was hard to call him a gentle person to begin with, but there seemed to be an even more intense blaze burning in his eyes than usual. If Ludo and Rimee Ruu weren't there, it was possible that he might have frightened the young children with his scowling.

I couldn't help but feel concerned by that, so I ended up visiting him along with Ai Fa after dinner.

"What, are you trying to offer encouragement for those of us who are fighting on the front line or something?" Donda Ruu was allotted a room in the main Sauti house, which he shared with Darmu Ruu.

Faced with this father and son pair who looked so different and yet felt oddly similar, I nodded and said, "Yeah. You seem to be steeling yourself really well...but I'm sure you must be facing unbelievable pressure having to lead everyone, Donda Ruu."

"You can refrain from any untoward comments. I haven't fallen so low as to need someone like you worrying about me."

"I'm not worried. I mean, I can't imagine you falling to any giba, Donda Ruu," I replied, figuring he'd at least let such trivial words slide. But honestly, I really was worried. As it was now, I was certain the community of the forest's edge needed a leading clan head like Donda Ruu. I truly hoped he would make it back safely without suffering any serious injuries.

"I trust in your strength, Donda Ruu. I just hope that you can use that great strength to lead everyone and overcome this trial."

"You don't need to tell me that. And you should just keep those conceited words in your head rather than speaking them out loud."

"I know, but I'm the kind of guy who doesn't feel right if I don't come out and say it. Sorry about that."

"Hmph," Donda Ruu snorted and took a swig of fruit wine. "This job will be done in another day or two. If not, the lord of the forest will move somewhere else. So go ahead and pray to the forest that it doesn't trample its way into the

fields of Genos tomorrow or whenever.”

“Right, got it.”

“The end of this trial is right in front of our eyes. So don’t you go slipping up either, Ai Fa.”

“Of course I won’t. I’ll put my life on the line to see this job through.”

At that, Donda Ruu let out an, “Aah... Looks like I’ve got to give you one more piece of advice. Being a hunter means living as long as you can, to keep on hunting even one giba more. If you die young out in the forest, you’ll be spoken of forever as a failure of a female hunter.” Instantly, Ai Fa’s mouth started trembling. She was probably trying as hard as she could to keep her lips from forming an adorable pout. “You’re twenty years too young to be talking about putting your life on the line. Instead, put your pride as a hunter on the line and see the job through without losing your life. Just keep in mind that living on is an important part of the job for someone as young as you.”

“Understood,” Ai Fa replied firmly. Darmu Ruu, meanwhile, just silently listened to their exchange.

After taking one more swig of fruit wine, Donda Ruu looked out the window up at the moon and broke out in a daring grin. “I wonder, just what does the lord of the forest taste like?”

And so our third day at the Sauti settlement came to a close.

Chapter 4: Showdown

1

This is all something I was told about after the fact.

On the fourth day since we were invited to the Sauti settlement, the thirty-first and final day of the indigo month, there was a strange stirring in the forest starting around when the sun hit its peak.

Everyone could sense that something serious was coming.

However, that didn't change what the hunters had to do.

The hunters from the clans under the Sauti deployed throughout the forest while coating themselves in the scent of giba warding fruit, just as they had done yesterday and the day before. They totaled sixteen, which was their full number aside from the seven who were seriously injured, though roughly half of those going out also had some kind of minor injury. However, they couldn't just leave the fate of their clan up to the Ruu hunters, with whom they had no blood ties whatsoever.

Those sixteen split up into groups of four and progressed into the forest as planned. Since they had hunted down a staggering number of giba over the past two days, there didn't seem to be many in the forest. And yet, in spite of that, the atmosphere still seemed unusually noisy. It was as if the very forest itself was stirring.

The hunters advanced into the forest, forcing down their uneasy feelings and the trembling in their chests. Ultimately, it was the young Vela clan head who saw it first. The previous clan head had lost his ability to hunt after facing off with the lord of the forest, and so the youth had taken up the position at the age of just eighteen.

What he found was a massive hole. It was dug out at the base of a thick tree, and looked like the mouth of some giant monster, pitch black and gaping open.

Despite the fact that it had briefly rained not long before the sun hit its peak, a nearby mound of dense soil was dry. On top of that, bits of a gigo-like plant giba loved were mixed into it.

A giba had dug the hole out very recently. However, an ordinary giba couldn't possibly make one so large.

Having received a signal from the young clan head, one of the hunters gave a brief blow on a grass whistle. Then, a similar response came from far away.

Their nerves even more on edge, they pushed deeper into the forest.

Before long, five hunters approached from the north. Actually, one of them had already retired from hunting—the Rutim elder Raa Rutim.

“There weren't any signs of giba in the north. If you found traces, then the lord must have moved to the east or south.”

The group then split into two again, and they advanced in both directions. Raa Rutim accompanied the Vela clan head as they searched to the east, while the other group went south. However, he stayed upwind so his sense of smell wouldn't be thrown off by the smell of giba warding fruit.

“I can't detect the lord's scent here either. We should move south bit by bit as we continue heading east.”

“Raa Rutim, you can pick up on its scent that precisely?”

“Normally, I wouldn't be able to be quite so certain. But since we wiped out the giba in this area yesterday, there are hardly any competing scents left in the area now,” Raa Rutim replied, glancing around with eyes that shined brightly with a light which didn't seem to have weakened at all with age. “Furthermore, the lord of the forest is always giving off the smell of madness and fury. There's no danger of me mistaking it for a lesser giba.”

“I see. Then we'll keep on going and...” the Vela clan head started to say, but Raa silently placed his hand over the youth's mouth.

Instantly, tension filled the air, and the hunters searched around for anything nearby.

Raa Rutim pointed straight out to the east. One of the hunters swiftly went

and climbed up a tree. After a short while, the high-pitch sound of a grass whistle rang out from high above.

The lord of the forest had been found.

The remaining hunters all grabbed the metal objects hanging from their hips—snapped blades and musical instruments made from scrap iron which came from the post town—and took off running east into the forest.

They started making noise with the objects they carried and shouting with all their might. Giba hated both the sounds from those instruments and the deep roaring bellows of humans. Adding that to the smell of the giba warding fruit they were coated with was how they were going to drive the lord of the forest in the direction they wanted.

There were also similar sounds approaching from the south, so that group must have heard the grass whistle signal.

“The hunting ground is to the east from here! Don’t let it escape to the south, no matter what!” the Vela clan head shouted as he ran through the forest. He was raring to take a swing at the lord of the forest if he caught up to it. But no matter how much he advanced, its sinister figure never came into view. Giba could move more agilely through the forest than any hunter.

“The lord is turning a little to the north! At this rate, it’ll miss the hunting ground!” Raa Rutim shouted out from behind. He wasn’t able to run as swiftly through the forest as the younger hunters.

Following the elder’s words, one of the young hunters sounded out a grass whistle a number of times, signaling to not let it escape to the north.

It was around then that the Vela clan head’s group started seeing traces of the lord of the forest. There were thin trees toppled over here and there, clearing the path for an unfamiliar animal trail.

With an upswell of strength coursing through their bodies, the hunters hurried onward. The shouts of their comrades were growing closer from the north and south too.

All sixteen of the hunters were driving the lord of the forest forward. As long as it didn’t break through their enclosure, it would soon reach the first hunting

ground they had prepared for it.



“The lord of the forest is approaching!” Dan Rutim shouted from high atop a tree.

The bow unit consisting of Ludo Ruu, Barthia, and Jeeda heard his shout from their hidden position down in the thicket.

“That stench definitely belongs to the lord! It’s coming from the west!”

“The west, huh? Then that’s down this path.”

With that, the three hunters crawled out of the thicket and hurriedly moved. There were a number of traps specially laid out for the lord of the forest, with the intention of using giba warding and summoning fruit to direct it into them.

With hunters converging from the north, south, and west, that only left one path open, so as long as the lord of the forest liked the smell of giba summoning fruit and hated the scent of giba warding fruit, it would definitely come this way.

The three of them moved to another thicket situated south of the path coming from the west. That position would allow them to aim for the lord of the forest’s right eye. Of course, there was no way to guarantee such a precise hit when it would surely come charging at an incredible speed, but the idea was to fire arrows while aiming at the right side of its head.

“Now, bring it on...” Ludo Ruu murmured, nocking an arrow. The bow and arrow was the weapon he was most skilled with. He personally preferred to swing a sword or hatchet, but just as his dad had said, since he was small he was on the weaker side for a hunter. That was why he had been polishing his skills with a bow ever since he turned thirteen.

He didn’t possess the strength needed to break a giba’s neck with the swing of a blade. But he could swiftly slit a throat with a knife, and he wouldn’t lose to anyone when it came to using a bow. Ludo Ruu prided himself on that.

Still, I’ve gotta settle the score with this guy at some point... Ludo Ruu thought to himself as he stole a glance over at Jeeda. The hunter from Mount Masara

was Ludo Ruu's equal with a bow. Even when they had shooting contests for a bit of sport, they still weren't ever able to declare a winner. *Next festival of the hunt, I'll have to have him participate in the contest of strength. I can't let myself lose to someone who's younger than me, and smaller at that.*

After that one last thought, Ludo Ruu concentrated intently. He released all the tension in his body, pointing an arrow at what was currently empty space.

After a short while, the roars of the hunters to the west came within earshot. Those shouts were meant to drive a giba forward. And he could hear the clear sound of a grass whistle too.

"It's coming!" Dan Rutim shouted out.

Not long after, Ludo Ruu felt an incredible presence to the west. He held his breath and drew his bow. Out of the corner of his vision, he spied a massive black figure. Now he simply let his heart guide him, adjusting the direction of his bow and releasing the arrow.

The same sensation he felt when stabbing a blade into his prey was now running throughout his entire body.

I hit it.

Even so, that huge black figure didn't slow down in the least, and kept on running past Ludo Ruu and the others.

The young hunter placed the bow over his shoulder and leaped out of the thicket, with Jeeda and Barthia soon appearing from not far away.

"We each fired only a single arrow, but all of them seemed to hit the lord's face. I don't know whether or not we got its eyeball, though," Jeeda muttered as he looked off in the direction where the lord had disappeared.

It was around then that Dan Rutim nimbly descended from the tree. The former Rutim clan head landed smoothly on just his right leg, then lifted his cane up in the air.

"Now then, our blades have been sheathed long enough! We've just got to chase the lord down and finish it off!"

With that, the three hunters eagerly took off after their quarry.

As he hobbled after them, Dan Rutim gave a displeased shout of, “No fair, leaving me behind!”



The lord of the forest had appeared at last.

The four hunters who had been awaiting its arrival at the first hunting ground—Donda Ruu, Darmu Ruu, Gazraan Rutim, and Rau Lea—stood facing the animal trail, their blades drawn.

“Listen up! Aim for its legs!”

Just as planned, the two members of the Ruu clan took the right while the other two readied themselves on the left.

Meanwhile, the lord of the forest was plunging forward along the cleared path.

It really was unbelievably huge. With its feet on the ground, its head reached up to around Donda Ruu’s shoulders, and its torso was as wide as a human standing with both arms spread out to the side. Its horns and tusks, meanwhile, looked like they might be as thick as a man’s arm. This giba was bigger than the ones whose pelts were displayed in the Ruu house, or even the one the skull displayed by the Suun clan had come from. In other words, it was the largest giba the people of the forest’s edge had ever encountered over the course of the past eighty years.

“Here it comes!” Donda Ruu shouted, swinging his blade with all his might. He swept low, and his blade flew straight in a horizontal slash.

With a dull thunk, Donda Ruu’s body was sent flying.

And with three other similar sounds, the other hunters were knocked away as well.

One slammed his back against a tree, while another was tossed into the thick grass, left to force down a pained moan as he rose back to his feet.

The lord of the forest was gone.

However, there were drops of blood leading off to the east.

“Damn! That thing is an unbelievable monster!” Rau Lea shouted, tossing his broken sword to the ground.

Donda Ruu’s blade had snapped at the middle as well.

With a snorted “Hmph,” the leading clan head pulled a new sword from its scabbard. They had come prepared, expecting that aiming at the lord’s legs when it was running at full force would be enough to snap a blade.

“So we’ve got two swords left, eh? Nobody’s injured, are they?”

“It didn’t snap my blade, it just took the skin from my palm with it,” Darmu Ruu replied, his eyes blazing bright as he held his right hand up for his father to see. Just as he had said, the skin on his right hand’s palm and fingers had been badly abraded. “I probably won’t be able to hold a sword for a while after today. But I won’t let go of my weapon until the lord falls.”

“Apply some medicinal herbs and wrap a cloth or something around it. That should help at least a bit,” Donda Ruu ordered, his eyes fixed east all the while. “I figure my sword broke its front right leg. What about you all?”

“I wouldn’t go that far on my end, but I think I at least fractured its rear right leg,” Darmu Ruu said.

“Damn! I’m pretty sure my sword just damaged its hoof!”

“Mine cut into its left thigh, and probably did a small amount of damage to the bone.”

“That should be sufficient. Now we’ve just got to wait here.”

Meanwhile, Rau Lea grumbled as he drew a new blade, “Hey, shouldn’t we move to the next hunting ground rather than just waiting? Then we could work together with Ai Fa and Mida in order to come at it from both sides.”

“There are numerous traps set up out there, so there isn’t enough footing to allow this many people to move about freely. If that weren’t the case, I would have been chasing after it myself rather than chatting here,” Donda Ruu replied, a blue blaze alight in both of his eyes. “We just need to wait. Either we’ll receive news that the lord has been taken down, or Ai Fa will lead it back to us.”



“It’s here,” Ai Fa whispered to herself from up in a tree.

She could spy the lord of the forest charging in the distance.

The massive beast was terribly injured. There were three arrows stuck in its face, and though it was pushing forward through the forest at an incredible speed, its footing looked unstable. It surely had a number of broken bones in its legs.

There were also a great number of snapped arrows in its back, and dark red patches of dried blood here and there across its pelt. The lord had been injured enough over the past several days that if it had been a normal giba, it would have died countless times over.

However, there was no sign whatsoever that the wild energy brimming from its massive frame was fading. It was as if the forest itself had taken shape in the form of a giba.

“Don’t let your guard down, Mida. At this rate, it might actually break through all the traps.”

“Yeah... I’ll try my best...”

Mida was down below Ai Fa.

If the lord did manage to escape every single trap, then it would surely be drawn by the smell giba summoning fruit hanging around Ai Fa’s body and charge right toward Mida. Then, if Mida’s club wasn’t able to settle things, she would hop down to the ground and lead the lord of the forest back to Donda Ruu and the others.

It was fortunate that they were able to face down the lord before any other giba stumbled into the traps...but Ai Fa couldn’t imagine such a ridiculously powerful beast ever losing its life to a simple snare. Only a hunter’s strength would be able to finish off this lord of the forest. Ai Fa firmly believed that to be the truth.

“Hoo...” Mida sighed.

The lord of the forest had entered the hunting ground.

The monstrous giba was charging forward as quickly as ever down the animal

trail, trees lining the path on either side of it. Its front legs dug into the ground, and then the first of the boards covered in dirt and dried grass cracked under the lord's weight. There was a taut rope beneath to activate the trap, which was triggered without a hitch, sending a giant board embedded with grigee stakes flying at the lord from the right. Thanks to the huge boulder attached to the back of the board, those stakes plunged into the lord's torso with every bit as much force as a hunter's slash.

However, the lord still didn't stop its charge.

Even when the same sort of trap came at it from the other side, the result remained the same.

Though the stakes from the traps stayed embedded in the lord's massive frame for a little while, they scattered to the ground as it continued its rampage.

The next trap was a net to capture the beast.

When the lord reached the point in question, Ai Fa cut a nearby vine. A mass of rocks it had been holding fell downward to raise a net of straw rope that ensnared the lord's huge frame. However, the net woven by the Sauti women was easily torn apart rather than lifting the lord off the ground.

After seeing that, Ai Fa cut the next vine.

This time, it was a falling rock trap. The bundle of rocks held together with a net came falling down with incredible force.

Those rocks slammed straight into the lord's back from above with as much mass as the lord's own huge frame had. If it had been a normal giba, its body likely would have ended up splattered all over the ground.

Ai Fa could hear the sound of its flesh being pummeled even from her high position.

However, the rocks fell to the ground, and the lord didn't stop moving.

All of that, and it still wasn't enough, eh?

Ai Fa returned the knife to her hip, as its role was finished.

There was only a small distance left between Mida and the lord at this point.

The young man readjusted his grip on his club's handle.

There was only one trap left.

The lord's front legs landed on it.

Instantly, the ground collapsed under its massive frame. It was a pitfall, the most common sort of trap employed by the people of the forest's edge. Giba couldn't leap above the height of their heads, so it was a trap that used the way their bodies were built against them.

The lord's body started pitching forwards into the hole, which had been dug extra deep to be safe. But in the next instant, the beast leaped. It jumped with all its might using its rear legs, which were still on firm ground. The pitfall was about twice as wide as the lord was long. However, the lord did not fall.

Dirt, vines, and rocks tumbled down into the hole, but the lord landed on the ground. With the momentum from that leap still behind its charge, it headed straight toward Mida.

The young hunter's face showed no fear as he swung his club straight down.

The lord's head took the blow, its snout plunging into the ground.

Even from up atop the tree, Ai Fa felt the impact like an earthquake.

"Did I get it...?" Mida questioned, still holding his club. The metal spikes sticking out of it had plunged deep into the lord's face.

Just as Ai Fa was rising and wondering whether she should slit its throat to finish it off...the lord suddenly got up. Even with the spikes still embedded and Mida holding the club, it gave a big swing of its head.

The momentum caused the spikes to slip out and Mida to land on the lord's back with a shrill cry of "Aah...!" before he tumbled down into the pitfall.

The vitality this beast possesses is unbelievable, Ai Fa thought to herself as she leaped down from the tree. Landing on the lord's snout that it still held high, she kicked off and cleared the pitfall trap.

After that, she just kept running through the forest without ever turning to look back.

Before long, she could sense the lord closing in from behind.

Apparently, it had leaped over the pitfall again without even a proper run-up. Still, that was fortunate for Mida's sake.

It's just as Donda Ruu said. Even with its eyes ruined, its legs broken, and its skull shattered, the lord still won't stop.

Since Ai Fa had been watching from atop a tree the whole time, she had been able to accurately assess the state the lord was in. Its front right leg was bent in a strange direction, and its hind legs had both suffered some sort of injury as well. One of the arrows in its face had managed to steal away the sight from its right eye, and Mida's blow shattered the bones in its face.

And in spite of all that, the lord of the forest was still chasing after Ai Fa.

As she ran full tilt through the forest, Ai Fa stole a quick glance behind.

Thanks to all those injuries, it was indeed moving less swiftly than it had a few days prior. At this rate it wouldn't be able to catch up to her, even without her needing to plunge into the thickets. But though there was no danger of it catching her, the lord remained hot on her heels despite the fact that she was running with all her might.

Its face was coated in blood, and mangled such that it was somewhat distorted to the right. There was blood gushing out of the red holes where its eyes had been. However, among the few parts of its body that remained undamaged were its horns and tusks, ominously jutting outward even now.

Since the lord couldn't see and no longer had proper control of its legs, it smacked into the trees on its left and right as it blundered through the forest with enough momentum to topple them over. If Ai Fa were to get her foot caught on a tree root or the like, she would either be trampled flat by those thick legs, or otherwise skewered from behind by its tusks. Even so, she kept on dashing through the forest without the slightest hesitation.

Eventually, her ever-reliable comrades came into view. Three of them were off to the side, while one stood right in the middle of the animal trail: Donda Ruu. As he gripped his blade with one knee on the ground, the leading clan head's blue eyes were blazing wildly.

With the last of her remaining strength, Ai Fa sprinted directly for Donda Ruu. Every moment she shaved off the time it would take to reach him decreased the danger he was in.

Ai Fa leaped right toward Donda Ruu, planting her foot on his cloak-clad right shoulder. Naturally, the leading clan head rose in response, and Ai Fa used the boost he provided to leap up to a branch on a tree to the left.

Donda Ruu threw himself into the grass on the opposite side as the lord of the forest dashed past him down the trail, just barely scraping his body. But the lord didn't turn as the animal trail started to bend, and it smacked its head right into a tree. As the lord passed by, the hunters on either side used the opportunity to once again slash at its legs.

As Ai Fa clung to a branch high up in the tree, she was left breathing heavily. Though the path to get here wasn't all that long, she still felt as if her lungs were about to burst.

Donda Ruu and the other hunters readjusted the grip they had on their blades as they rose once more. But as they did, a hearty shout rang through the air. "Raaah!"

The newly appeared hunter thrust a long sword straight into the lord's throat from the side as the beast tried to rise. It was Ludo Ruu, who had finished his task with the bow. He had come running from farther down the trail, and used his momentum as part of his attack. As a result, nearly half of the blade ended up buried in the lord's neck.

The hunters rushed over, wondering if that had finished it. But before they could encircle it, the lord suddenly let out a bellow. Giba rarely ever made a sound. However, that deep, rumbling roar would surely frighten even other giba.

As the air trembled, the birds hidden in the forest all suddenly took flight at once. If there were mundt or giiz around, they surely would have fled as well. That frightening roar seemed as if it had come from an awakened god of calamity, revived from the deepest depths of the world.

"Whoa!" Ludo Ruu shouted, leaping away beyond the thicket.

The lord bellowed yet again, despite the blade still buried in its neck. As it did, it turned Ai Fa's way. It was seeking her out through the scent of the giba summoning fruit. The red holes that its eyes had become seemed to glare her way, which was enough to send a chill up even her back.

"You damn monster!" Darmu Ruu shouted as he slashed at the beast. His blow came from the side and was aimed at its right rear leg. However, the lord's head turned and a huge horn deflected Darmu Ruu's blade. That alone was enough to snap the steel, and Darmu Ruu fell to the ground shoulder first.

Gazraan Rutim also swung at the same time, but the lord avoided his assault with a swift leap. And before Gazraan Rutim could correct his posture after stumbling, a tusk surged at his flank. Though the hunter at least managed to dodge a fatal blow, the side of the tusk hit him in the chest, and he was sent flying through the air like a pebble.

"Impossible! How can it still fight so well when it's lost both eyes?!" Bartha shouted from somewhere Ai Fa couldn't see.

In the same instant, fresh arrows shot into the lord's massive frame. But even so, the huge giba showed no pain, instead coming after Rau Lea, who was the next closest.

"Damn!" Rau Lea dropped down to the ground and rolled in order to avoid the charge. As he did so, he drew a knife and thrust it into the lord's neck. Naturally, the lord didn't collapse to the ground even still.

Darmu Ruu and Gazraan Rutim used their swords as canes to slowly prop themselves up. Donda Ruu shouted at them, "Don't go near it! It's using up the last of its strength! If you approach carelessly, it'll gouge a hole in you!"

All four of the lord's limbs were bent in strange directions. Blood was gushing around the sword that Ludo Ruu had thrust into its neck. But even so, the lord hadn't lost its strength. It was possible that its life had already been exhausted... Like Donda Ruu had said, it was expending all the strength left in its body in one final burst.

"The next time it stops moving, swing your blades with all your might! We'll settle things then and there!"

“Is it even possible to get that damn monster to stop?!” Rau Lea questioned, sounding utterly bewildered.

As Donda Ruu held his sword in both hands, he adjusted his posture. “I’ll *make* it stop!”

Donda Ruu was standing right between the lord and the tree Ai Fa was clinging to. He had realized that the lord was once again aiming for her. As Ai Fa got her breathing in order, she drew her own blade up in the tree. A strategy had suddenly come to her, like some sort of revelation from the heavens.

With yet another monstrous bellow, the lord of the forest took off running.

It was heading straight toward Ai Fa, which meant it was charging at Donda Ruu first.

“Fall!” Donda Ruu shouted, swinging his blade horizontally from a low posture.

Blood gushed forth, and two front legs flew through the air.

And yet, the lord’s charge hadn’t stopped.

One of the beast’s tusks had dug into Donda Ruu’s right shoulder.

In that very instant, though, Ai Fa leaped down to the ground from the tree.

She swiftly closed the distance between her and Donda Ruu’s back, and the lord’s snout on the other side of it.

Ai Fa thrust her blade straight ahead, aiming for the gap between Donda Ruu’s right arm and his torso.



The sword plunged straight into the lord's throat. But naturally, such an attack still wasn't enough to stop the beast's charge.

With the lord, Ai Fa, and Donda Ruu all still entangled, they crashed into a tree. There was an ominous cracking sound from within Ai Fa's body. In all likelihood, she had broken some ribs. But even so, she didn't let go of her blade.

Even when the butt of the grip was pushed back into the trunk of the tree and the blade was forced into the lord's neck all the way down to its base, she still kept holding on.

"You're being utterly reckless..." Ai Fa heard Donda Ruu say from above her as they were pressed against the tree.

She had wanted to reply that she had hit upon the idea of using the force of the lord's charge against it to inflict a serious injury, and that she would at least not lose her life as long as he blunted its strength, but her voice just wouldn't come.

"Hey, you two are still alive, right?! We're moving it now!" Rau Lea called out from the other side of the lord's massive frame.

Ai Fa wanted to reply "No, not yet!" but before she could, the lord's rear legs kicked off. In an unbelievable display of strength, Ai Fa's body was tossed into the air. And out of the corner of her eye, she could see that Donda Ruu had met the same fate.

As her hand slipped from the blade, the forest, sky, and ground all tumbled about in her field of vision.

For what felt like an eternity, Ai Fa flew through the air, wondering just how high she had been thrown.

If she fell on her head, there was no way that she could possibly survive.

And so, almost without thinking, she moved to cradle her head and curled her back as best she could.

She would return home alive, without fail.

It was that thought alone that Ai Fa clung to as she nearly lost consciousness.

And then...

Ai Fa's fall was gently halted by the embrace of someone's warm, powerful arms.

"Hmm. I hurried over here as quickly as I could, but it looks like the job's already finished!"

It was Dan Rutim.

As Ai Fa stared up at him, she found him smiling back at her with a blue sky behind him.

"Well, it's all good as long as everyone's still alive and kicking! Let's head on back to the Sauti settlement!"

Still unable to reply, Ai Fa glanced around.

The lord of the forest's massive body had collapsed there on the ground, both its front legs missing, a sword piercing its throat, and the last of its strength finally exhausted.

2

And so, when we returned to the Sauti settlement after wrapping up business in the post town, we found the lord of the forest's massive corpse already lying there.

Apparently, the hunters had encountered the beast not long after entering the forest, and they had settled things less than an hour later.

There were many wounded. Ai Fa and Donda Ruu in particular suffered especially serious injuries, so at first I was really worried rather than happy.

Ai Fa had some broken ribs, but by the time I returned to the settlement, she had already fallen asleep with bandages wrapped around her abdomen. As would be expected, she had used romu leaves to ease the pain.

"Still, she got off lightly compared to what happened to Deem Rutim when he took a giba's charge. If you give it a month, she should have her strength as a hunter back," Dan Rutim had said with a smile.

On the other hand, the lord's tusk had apparently dug into Donda Ruu's right shoulder. Fortunately, his muscles and bones weren't seriously injured, so the expectation was that he would be healed up in about two months or so.

Hearing everything that happened on the hunt made our heads spin for a while, but afterward we were able to once again turn our attention to the lord of the forest.

It certainly was an unbelievably massive giba.

In fact, I figured it was even bigger than the karon I had seen in Dabagg.

I estimated that it was roughly around 1.7 meters tall and 2.5 meters long, and I wasn't sure even a pair of adult men would be able to wrap their arms around its entire body. And speaking of arms, its horns and tusks were about as long and thick as mine. Its body was like a small hill lying in the middle of the plaza.

Examining it closer, the lord's whole body was riddled with wounds. Even though it had apparently been washed, the thick stench of blood still lingered about it. It had lost both eyes, the right half of its face had been smashed in, and its front legs had both been severed at the knees. To top it all off, it had a truly spectacular number of injuries from swords and arrows.

Of particular note was the sword that pierced its throat. It was a hunter's blade of around eighty centimeters in length, buried almost completely in the lord's neck.

Though all the arrows and stakes stuck in its body had been removed, that blade alone remained, as it was embedded so deeply in the beast's flesh that it couldn't be pulled out. Shockingly, Ai Fa had been the one responsible for this, the fatal blow.

"The lord had one last burst of strength after, but then it collapsed all on its own before we could strike it," Rau Lea grumbled, sounding obviously displeased.

Meanwhile, Dari Sauti was walking over to us. "Asuta, I'd like to ask all of you to do one last job for us. Could you use the lord's meat in some way to make tonight's dinner?"

“Huh? You want to use this meat? But the taste will definitely suffer after all the damage it took.”

“It doesn’t matter what it tastes like. I just want everyone under the Sauti to eat it. We need to regain the strength that we lost to it.” Dari Sauti had a look in his eyes that was calm, and yet terribly intense.

After once more inspecting the lord, I nodded back, “All right. Still, I’ll try my hardest to make it as tasty as possible. Could we ask for any women who aren’t busy to help out?”

“Of course. I’ll be summoning everyone under the clan here, so use as many as you like... I humbly request your assistance.” And with that, Dari Sauti shouted out to the surrounding hunters under him, “Skin the lord!”

It went without saying, but this was an incredibly big job.

After all, there were sixty-eight people in total under the Sauti and an additional nineteen guests, making for eighty-seven people in total. We had been preparing that much soup each day, but this time around we would need to put in even more effort.

On top of that, the prep work would also take time. As soon as he told me he didn’t care if it was tasty or not, I decided to put in all the effort I could.

To eat meat that hadn’t been properly bloodlet, you first had to carefully wash it in saltwater. We started by gathering up all the salt to be found in the settlement, then set about cleansing the cuts of meat. That still wasn’t enough to fully wipe away the stench, though, so I decided on dishes with an especially strong aroma. There definitely weren’t enough vegetables either, and there was no time to go buy more from the post town, so we had some brought from the Ruu clan’s stock. Fortunately, Sheera, Lala, and Rimee Ruu also came over along with them, as they had finished their work back home. Since Reina and Vina Ruu had been staying here already, it was like a gathering of the Ruu clan’s elites.

Now that we had their aid, we started giving the Sauti women their orders. Time passed in a flash, with things so lively that it was as if we were in the middle of a gambling den or something.

By the time the sun set in the west, bonfires had been lit to illuminate the plaza where everyone was gathered. Around half an hour after that, our work was finally finished.

“This is not a celebratory banquet. It is a solemn dinner in which we shall regain the strength that we lost,” Dari Sauti stated, a bonfire burning bright behind him. “Thanks to the kindness of a number of clans, the Ruu foremost among them, we were able to escape our destruction. We must become stronger than ever before in order to repay that kindness from here on out. To this end, we shall now take the great strength of the lord of the forest into ourselves.”

Donda Ruu was seated there next to Dari Sauti’s feet. Though he was surely also using romu leaves to dull the pain, his eyes were blazing just as bright as always and he didn’t appear to be impaired in the least.

Meanwhile, Ai Fa was still sleeping in the Vela house, and as I listened to Dari Sauti’s words, I wanted to rush to her side as soon as possible.

“Before we eat, I would like to first give symbols of our gratitude to those clans who lent us their strength.”

When he said that, several women led by Mil Fei Sauti quietly moved to the front of the bonfire. With Ludo Ruu’s aid, Donda Ruu managed to force himself to his feet.

“Firstly to the Ruu clan, I give the lord of the forest’s right horn.”

With that, Mil Fei Sauti passed a horn the size of my arm to Dari Sauti, who then handed it to Donda Ruu.

“And to the Rutim, the right tusk.”

Gazraan Rutim politely accepted the gift in question. Though Gazraan Rutim had taken a heavy blow to the chest, there didn’t seem to be any damage to his bones, and so supposedly he would have his strength back after resting for a few days.

“To the Lea, the left tusk.”

Rau Lea looked rather displeased. It seemed his injuries weren’t as serious as

what he had suffered on the first day. However, every last one of the hunters had bruises and scratches all over.

“To the Fa, the left horn.”

Since my clan head wasn't present, I accepted that one in her place.

The massive old giba horn was chipped and scratched all over. Being so large, it naturally had quite a bit of heft to it too.

“And I would like to express my gratitude to the chefs as well. To the Deen clan, I give this right leg bone.”

Toor Deen timidly stepped forward and was handed a huge thigh bone. Just a few hours ago we had been removing the meat from it.

“To the Sudra, this bone from the left leg.”

Yun Sudra accepted the gift, looking even now like she was about to break out in tears of gratitude. As she stood there beside me, she hugged it tight to her chest.

“Along with these horns, tusks, and bones, I would also like you all to pass on tales of this endeavor to your children and grandchildren. Share with them how the Ruu, Rutim, Lea, Fa, Deen, and Sudra came together to save the Sauti from destruction and were given these gifts in return. And we shall do the same with the damaged skull that has had its horns and tusks removed. I shall never forget the debt of gratitude I feel my whole life long.” With that, Dari Sauti's square-jawed face broke out in the same smile as always. “Well then, let's get this dinner started. It may not be a banquet, but I hope it will let you all feel the overflowing joy of being alive... We give thanks for the blessings of the forest, and offer our gratitude to all the chefs who manned the flame and gave us our life for this night.”

It wasn't a banquet, and so everyone present recited the premeal chant. No one held up any bottles of fruit wine, and the plates were silently passed around.

The bonfires lit all about were also being used to grill pieces of meat, one after another. With just three hours of prep time, we hadn't been able to finish a grilled dish too. Chunks of giba meat from the lord of the forest had been

marinated in tau oil, sugar, myamuu, and herbs to eliminate the stench, and were currently cooking directly over the flame on metal skewers.

In the meantime, we went ahead and set out our finished dishes. There were three different completed dishes: giba curry, hot pot stew with tarapa, and sautéed meat and pepe. All of them were powerfully flavored in order to cover up the stench, and used plenty of ingredients. If anyone's tongue got worn out, they would just have to give it a chance to rest by having a few of the mountain of baked poitan we had prepared.

"Wah ha ha! That's the lord of the forest for you! This meat's incredibly chewy!" a laughing voice shouted once we finished laying out the dishes. Though I wanted to hurry to Ai Fa, after a bit of hesitation I ended up heading over toward the laughter. Naturally, I found the members of the Rutim clan gathered there, illuminated by a bonfire.

"What do you think of the taste, Dan Rutim?"

"Oh, Asuta! It's incredibly tough, but there's no issue with the taste! The faint bit of giba stench it still has is honestly kinda interesting!"

"Right. The lord of the forest wasn't just huge, it also had unusually tough meat, which made cutting it up quite a chore."

Still, this much toughness was no issue for the people of the forest's edge. Dan Rutim just kept grinning away as he bit into the rib meat. For my part, this was the first time I'd ever cooked such ridiculously huge spare ribs.

"And, well, I also wanted to thank you too, Dan Rutim..."

"Hmm? Ah, you mean about Ai Fa? I just happened to be standing where she was going to fall! I don't see why I should be thanked over and over again for that!"

"No, when I think about what would have happened if we weren't so lucky, it makes me shiver. The Fa clan owes you a lot."

"You don't owe me anything, Asuta! We all worked together in order to take down the lord of the forest! If any one of us weren't there, someone might well have lost their life. But we all protected one another, so there's no need for anyone to feel especially indebted to anyone else!" Dan Rutim said, shooting

me a grin. “And that doesn’t just go for us hunters! The reason we were able to give our all is because our cooks prepared such delicious food for us! That’s why Dari Sauti gave the Deen and Sudra chefs those bones from the lord!”

“Right...” I said with a smile of my own. “I guess I’ll try to hold back on all the thanks, then. But still, you all worked hard.”

“Right! Looking back, these past few days have been pretty fun!”

If Ai Fa and Donda Ruu hadn’t been seriously injured, I probably would have said the same thing, and meant it from the bottom of my heart.

As that thought ran through my head, Gazraan Rutim sent me a gentle smile. “Asuta, you already finished your work as a chef, didn’t you? So now I believe you should do your duty as a member of the Fa clan.”

“Right... Thank you, Gazraan Rutim.”

After bowing to the members of the Rutim clan, I went ahead and secured some of each dish. I could just eat whatever was left over, but I wanted to have some ready so that Ai Fa would be able to eat whatever she pleased when she woke up.

I grabbed a wooden plank to use in place of a tray, and then went ahead and set the wooden plates on top of it. Around half of the plates we were using tonight were actually supposed to be for the outdoor restaurant.

After grabbing helpings of the three types of dishes, some baked poitan, and several pieces of grilled meat, I hurried over to the Vela house. Along the way, I saw the members of the Ruu clan gathered around a bonfire. Since Donda Ruu and Ludo Ruu were sitting together elsewhere, that meant only the five women and Darmu Ruu were here.

“I don’t need women to help me eat! I’m not a child!” Darmu Ruu angrily shouted. Aside from Ai Fa and Donda Ruu, he had been the most seriously injured. Apparently, the skin on his right palm had been abraded, and his left shoulder dislocated.

“So you say, but just who exactly went and spilled such precious food on the ground?” Vina Ruu countered.

“That’s right! We worked really hard making it, so you’d better not waste any!” Rimee Ruu said.

The two middle sisters giggled at the retorts coming from the eldest and youngest. Sheera Ruu was there too, standing right in front of Darmu Ruu with her knees bent, holding a wooden plate and spoon.

It might’ve been amusing to stay and watch them, but I pushed that pointless impulse back and instead hurried to the Vela house.

Along the way, I ran into Yun Sudra. She was still holding the massive thighbone as she smiled and called out, “Ah, Asuta.”

“Hey, what’s up? Aren’t you going to eat?”

“I kinda feel like I’ve got some sort of lump in my throat... I don’t think I could get anything down until my emotions settle a bit.”

“I see.” I nodded in understanding.

Her gaze fell to the makeshift tray I was holding, and she broke out in an even brighter smile. “Are you going to Ai Fa? Please, don’t let me keep you. I’m sure she’ll be sad if you’re not there when she wakes up.”

“Yeah...” Even so, I hesitated.

Yun Sudra gave a cute little tilt of her head. “What is it? You aren’t the sort of person to treat Ai Fa so crudely.”

With a small sigh, I simply replied, “Right,” and got moving again.

However, there was yet another person awaiting me in front of the house in question: Mil Fei Sauti, who had been running around so busily not long ago. She was raising her hand up to the door, but stopped, instead quietly turning to look my way.

“What’s going on, Mil Fei Sauti?”

“Ah, I just wanted to come check in since everyone had left the house to help with work. You came to check on Ai Fa too, didn’t you?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

This wasn’t the branch house assigned to us, but rather the main Vela house

where the wounded were gathered. Ai Fa was here, being looked after by the Vela women.

“The seriously injured men are past the worst of it. And now that the lord of the forest has been defeated, the Sauti clan can start to regain our strength bit by bit,” Mil Fei Sauti said as she glanced around the plaza.

The feast was similar in scale to the Ruu banquets in terms of the number of people present. Brawny hunters, graceful women, the children born to them, and just a few older folks... Everyone was gathered around the bonfires, eating the meat of the lord. There wasn't the same wild energy in the air as you'd have at a banquet, but everyone was still appreciating the joy of life as was fitting for the people of the forest's edge.

As I held my heavy tray, I smiled back and said, “Right. I'm sure that the Sauti will be just fine. Obviously, there's gonna be plenty of difficulties ahead, but if you do your best, everything will work out in the end.”

“Indeed.” Mil Fei Sauti nodded in response, but she didn't move from the spot. Instead, she started staring straight at me. “Asuta, I ask that you not speak a word of this to anyone...”

“Huh?”

As I stood there taken aback, Mil Fei Sauti suddenly kneeled down. She crossed both arms in front of her chest and bowed deeply to me.

“The Sauti clan was saved thanks to the effort all of you put in. If ever a time comes when your clan is in crisis, I promise to give everything I have to aid you.”

“Ah, you shouldn't go so far, Mil Fei Sauti...”

“I know. As the leader of the women, I cannot let my clan members see me like this,” she said as she rose to her feet. The expression she wore looked just as strict as always, but there were some faint tears just barely showing in her eyes. “Still, that's how I truly feel. And I'm certain our clan head Dari feels much the same. I shall never forget the kindness you have shown for as long as I live.”

“Thank you. It would make me very glad if the Fa have managed to become friends with the Sauti.”

“No, we’ll have to work very hard to be worthy of calling ourselves your friends after this,” Mil Fei Sauti said, her voice remaining perfectly solemn as she opened the door. “Now then, I welcome you into this house in place of the Vela women. Please, go ahead and enter.”

I gave a quick bow and stepped into the dimly lit room. After taking off my shoes, I first cut across the main hall and advanced down a hallway to the right. The men were off on the left, and so Ai Fa alone should have been sleeping down this way.

After giving a light knock first to be safe, I went ahead and peered inside.

Ai Fa was still sleeping away silently, just as she had been a few hours prior.

She was facing upward atop the bedding as she slept. Her hunter’s cloak was removed, and she had bandages wrapped around her abdomen. She must have been suffering quite a bit to lay like that, as she usually slept on her side.

With a “Hmm...?” there was a faint twitch of her eyelids.

“Did I wake you?” I asked as I kneeled down next to her pillow.

At that, Ai Fa’s eyelids opened halfway, and her blue eyes stared blankly. Then her lips opened, and she whispered, “Asuta...”

“Yeah, it’s me. Are your injuries doing okay?”

“Yes...this is nothing...”

Ai Fa’s right hand slowly reached out toward me, but just before the tips of her fingers brushed up against my cheek, she suddenly stopped.

“You don’t mind if I touch you, do you...?”

“I don’t. I’m mentally prepared.”

Ai Fa’s hand caressed my cheek. “I returned, just like I promised... Now it’s time for you to see your promise through...”

“Right. We ended up going with a bit of an odd lineup, but hopefully it’s to your tastes.”

I lent Ai Fa a hand and helped her to sit up. Then I placed a soft cloth behind her and had her lean against the wall.

Perhaps thanks to the romu leaves, Ai Fa wasn't showing any signs of being in pain. However, her eyes didn't seem to be quite fully focused.

"Now then, what do you want to start with? Sorry, they're all really strongly flavored dishes."

"I'm fine with anything. I feel so hungry that I could die. I need your cooking in order to heal..."

"You don't have to force yourself to speak. Can you hold a plate yourself?"

"I can't," Ai Fa replied in a childish tone. "I couldn't bear spilling the food you worked so hard to make... So you can hold the plate."

"Yeah, yeah, as you wish."

I figured it might be good to start with a soup, so I held out the hot pot stew prepared with tarapa for her. However, Ai Fa just stared at me, not moving to pick up the spoon.

"Er, is it difficult to lift your arm?"

Ai Fa didn't reply, instead simply opening her mouth a bit with an "Aah." It was a repeat of when she dislocated her left elbow.

Feeling terribly shaken up inside, I brought the spoon up to Ai Fa's mouth. As she bit into the chewy giba innards, she muttered, "It's spicy."



“Yeah, since I used a fair bit of chitt seeds. But the stench is hardly noticeable, right? The offal is from the lord of the forest.”

“Right. It’s delicious,” Ai Fa said with a nod. “I want to eat ordinary meat.”

“Then I guess you should try this sautéed meat and pepe next. It’s strongly flavored too, but I wouldn’t call it spicy.”

Ai Fa kept on slowly eating, staring at my face all the while. But when the plate was about half empty, she seemed to become tired, as her head started tilting a bit.

“Are you sleepy? If you are, you should rest a bit more.”

“I’m not...” she grumbled back as she slumped down. Out of fear that she might aggravate her injuries if she fell over, I hurriedly reached out and supported her.

My hands were now up against her exposed shoulders. Her body seemed to be just a bit warmer than usual.

“Okay, how about we lay you down? I’ll heat the food back up for you later.”

“I’m not sleepy... Besides, I believe it’s easier for me to sit than to lie down...”

“I see. Then go ahead and get some rest like this.”

I sat down, leaning my back against the wall myself, still supporting my clan head’s body. Her head, meanwhile, lolled onto my shoulder.

“Ah... It’s you, Asuta...”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

I could feel her body heat up against my shoulder and ear. She really was warmer than usual, with the top of her head in particular feeling like it was on fire, but when I compared that to how she used to be as cold as ice when we first met, I could sense how much vitality she possessed now.

Since my concerns for Ai Fa’s wellbeing took priority, I didn’t feel bashful in the slightest. All I felt was how truly precious she was to me.

“Asuta... I made it back...”

“Yeah. You might have been injured, but if you can put up with it for a month or so, you should be back to normal.”

“Are you happy about that?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Don’t you want me...to lose my strength as a hunter?”

With a slight tilt of my head, I tried to glance down at Ai Fa’s expression, but since we were so close right now, that proved difficult. Her long bangs blocked my vision, so I could only see her mouth.

“Of course not. All I want is for you to keep doing your best as a hunter. Without getting injured, as much as possible.”

“But why?” Ai Fa whispered back.

I gently leaned my cheek up against her blonde head of hair.

“You live for your work as a hunter, don’t you? There’s no way I would ever wish for you to lose that.”

Ai Fa didn’t say anything in response.

“If our positions were reversed and you said you wanted me to lose the ability to cook, I would be completely crushed. There’s no way I’d ever wish such a thing for you.”

Ai Fa just kept silently pressing her head up against my cheek.

Then, her hand oh-so-timidly reached out for my own.

“Can I really...keep staying by your side?”

“Of course. In fact, it’d be a big problem for me if you disappeared.”

“But, if it weren’t for me, then you...”

“The thought of not having you around is so awful I don’t even want to consider it.” I strongly returned Ai Fa’s grip, which felt so unusually weak. “It can’t be anyone but you. Please, stay by my side for the rest of my life, as the proud head of the Fa clan. That’s all I want...”

Ai Fa bit her lip, then put all her weight on me.

As I kept gripping her hand, I supported her weight as she needed me to.

With that, our time at the Sauti settlement came to a close alongside the end of the indigo month.

Intermezzo: The Customers of the Outdoor Restaurant

It was the second day since the opening of the outdoor restaurant and once again, Dora and his daughter, Tara, were enjoying a giba meal there.

Plenty more seating had been prepared for the place since yesterday, so all the customers were able to be seated without issue. But the flow of customers through the place seemed even higher than before, making things noisier still.

In the middle of all that, Tara was slurping a giba soup dish with a smile. Dora probably had a similar look on his face too. This new dish that the members of the Ruu clan were selling really was even tastier than the one they had prepared at his house not that long ago. And the people around him, regardless of age or standing, all looked to be enjoying that same wonderful taste.

“Hey, good to see you again,” a voice called out from Dora’s side. When he turned to look, he found Yumi smiling there holding a giba dish in each hand.

When Tara noticed, she looked even happier than before. “Ooh, it’s Yumi! You should eat with us again today!”

“Yeah, I’d love to, but it looks like the chairs at your table are already filled.”

“Then sit together with me! Look, I’ll give you half the seat!”

Tara shifted her position atop the log chair, making Yumi ponder aloud, “Hmm? But is there enough room? I mean, two people in one chair...”

“I’ll be fine. But maybe there won’t be enough room since your bottom is so big...”

“It’s not big, jeez!” Yumi snapped back as her cheeks went quite red, and she thumped down beside Tara. Though she was still young, her figure was already voluptuous enough to compete with Vina Ruu. “See? I fit just fine, didn’t I? So take that back about me having a big butt!”

“But why? Isn’t it good for a woman to have a big bottom?”

“That’s just something men decided by themselves. Even if you end up working in the post town too, you should try not to pick up such vulgar ideas,” Yumi replied, giving Tara an angry poke in the cheek after sitting down her food.

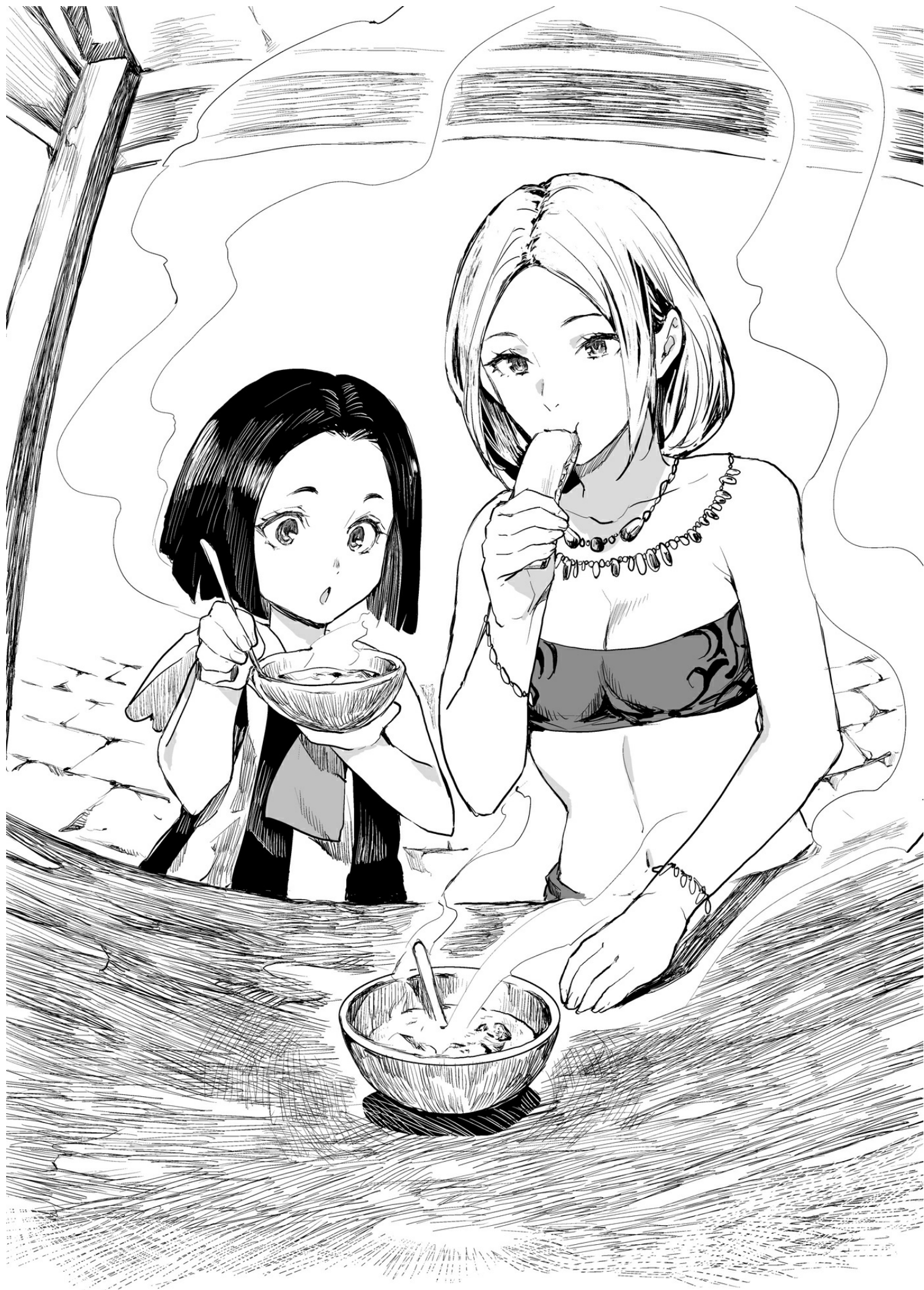
The young girl didn’t seem ashamed in the least, though, just laughing back. “Ah ha ha.”

“You two sure do get along well. Do you have younger siblings, Yumi?” Dora interjected.

In response, Yumi tilted her head a bit and questioned, “Why do you ask?”

“Well, you just seem used to handling young children. Despite what you may think, Tara’s actually pretty shy.”

“Really? I don’t see how that could be. She’s been like this ever since I met her,” Yumi said back as she took a bite of giba cooking. It was the dish Asuta called a poitan wrap, which was made by wrapping poitan around salty-sweet grilled meat.



“That’s why I figured you might have a little brother or sister. Was I wrong?”

“Yep. I’m an only child. Still, I always had little brats who lived nearby following me around since I was about Tara’s age, so maybe I did get used to handling kids like that.”

“I see,” Dora said, sounding satisfied with the answer.

Apparently, Yumi had been born in the slums of the post town. Dora lived in the Daleim lands, and when he first started working as a street vendor in the post town, he was warned by the guards to never go near the slums. As a consequence of the prosperity of Genos, there were a great number of homeless people unable to get jobs and dangerous outlaws living there, supposedly.

And it was true that it would be hard to call Yumi a proper upright young lady. Her attire only wrapped around her chest and waist, and she wore flashy jingling accessories. The Daleim territory was largely farmland, and not a single girl there dressed like that.

However, Dora didn’t look upon Yumi with caution. If she were an ill-natured girl, Tara would never have warmed up to her so quickly... And besides, she also was friendly with Asuta and the people of the forest’s edge. It was impossible to imagine those brave, earnest folks opening up to a bad person.

“What is it...? Is there something stuck to my face?” Yumi questioned, giving a sigh of satisfaction after trying the soup dish.

“No, it’s nothing,” Dora replied in a fluster, shaking his hands. “I was just letting my thoughts wander a bit. Now that I think about it, is your clothing in a Sym style, Yumi?”

“Hmm? I’m not sure. I’ve never seen women from Sym, and this was made in Selva. Fabrics from Sym cost a lot, after all.”

“Is that so? But don’t the people of the forest’s edge wear fabrics from Sym?”

“Ah, I think that might be true. Don’t the swirling patterns look like leaves and flowers? I guess it makes sense that the people of the forest’s edge would prefer them,” Yumi replied as she once again slurped some soup. “Anyway,

what I'm wearing is just what's trendy in the post town right now. There are some hardheaded folks around who hate stuff like this, though."

"Hmm. I'm fond of a seductive look myself... Ah, not that I'd ever look at you that way."

At that, Yumi gave him an amused grin. "Of course not! Tara's mom would rake you over the coals for that, right? Hey, wait, are you the one who's teaching Tara that vulgar stuff?"

"Come on, cut it out," Dora said while scratching his head, to which Yumi gave an amused chuckle. And then as she kept on smiling, Yumi brought a hand up to her slender jaw.

"Now that I think about it, the women of the forest's edge have been dressing like that since forever... So, are they the reason this became a trend, I wonder?"

"Huh? There's no way that's how it happened. I've been coming and going from the post town for ten years now, and I've always seen girls dressed like you."

"But the people of the forest's edge moved to the Morga forest decades ago, didn't they? And if they've been dressing like that all this time, it's certainly possible."

"Hmm, I'm not so sure. I mean, townsfolk tended to not look so fondly on the people of the forest's edge up till recently, so I don't think they'd try to emulate their attire..." Dora replied, his voice getting a bit quieter. Reina Ruu was right nearby washing dishes, and Dora himself had been one of those people who looked down on them, which was a fact he couldn't help but feel guilty for now.

However, Yumi looked just fine as she tilted her head and said, "You think? But the women of the forest's edge are all so pretty. Even people who are prejudiced against them can't deny that. So it doesn't seem strange at all to me, wanting to be pretty like them."

And so, young girls started wearing clothing similar to that of the women of the forest's edge... Was such a thing truly possible? As someone only interested in how his vegetables turned out, Dora hadn't the foggiest.

"So, did you keep your guard up around the people of the forest's edge until

you met Asuta and everyone too, Yumi...?” Dora questioned, trying to shift the conversation.

“Yeah.” Yumi indifferently nodded back. “My dad hated them, and that had an impact on me. In fact, I only approached Asuta’s stall in the first place in order to complain.”

“Oh really?”

“Yup. Did Tara not tell you about this? That ridiculously huge guy from the Suun showed up to buy food in the middle of what I was doing...and I guess that’s when I met Tara too.”

“Yeah!” Tara energetically nodded.

As she patted the younger girl on the head, Yumi broke out in a bright smile. “Well, it’s no surprise that’s how things went back then. I mean, the members of the Suun clan really were causing trouble in the post town. And someone I knew had their inn’s stall smashed. It was this big commotion... Plus, there was a drunk guy who threw his wine bottles at people too.”

“I see. I had only ever heard rumors about that, but I was still so cold to the people of the forest’s edge. It makes me feel so ashamed to think back on it.”

“You don’t have to feel that way! Those people have all been properly judged now and the misunderstandings have been cleared up, so there’s no reason to worry about it. Right, Reina Ruu?”

Reina Ruu looked up from her work cleaning plates in a water-filled barrel and smiled back as she answered, “Right. We pointlessly disliked the townsfolk too. So now we want to form proper bonds with everyone from here on out.”

“Yeah, you see?! There are still plenty of stubborn folks like my old man left out there! So the first step will have to be clearing up their misconceptions!”

At that point a small figure sneaked over and hugged Tara from behind. After giving a little surprised shriek, though, Tara realized who it was and her expression grew bright.

“Ah, Rimee Ruu! Are you done with your work at the stalls?”

“Yeah, I traded places with Ama Min Rutim!”

The young girl was Rimee Ruu, Reina Ruu's little sister. She was eight years old just like Tara, and was as adorable as they came.

Rimee Ruu's reddish-brown hair swayed as she rubbed her cheek up against Tara, who closed her eyes happily. Neither of them had many friends their age, and perhaps that was why they had become so very close so quickly.

"I'll clean up any plates you're finished with! Are you all done, Dora?"

"Yes, and it was truly delicious. I'm going to have to come and buy some every single day."

Dora handed his empty plate to Rimee Ruu, and stood up while holding his partially eaten giba manju. As soon as he did, a southerner with a freshly purchased dish swiftly took his place. Even though they had increased the seating so much, there were still customers continuously packing in.

After Tara gulped down what little food was still on her plate, she followed Dora's example and stood up as well. Now that she finally had the seat to herself, Yumi just said, "Good grief," and crossed her legs, then turned to face Reina Ruu. Tara was down hugging her knees next to Rimee Ruu as the young girl started helping her sister clean dishes, everyone chatting happily.

"This really is an incredible turnout. But, well, guess that's only natural when you're selling something this delicious," Dora chimed in.

"Right," Reina Ruu replied with a smile and a nod. "I'm truly grateful that people are enjoying the new dish. I'm enjoying doing business with the stalls more and more all the time."

Though Reina Ruu was polite, she never felt especially distant. At least when it came to Dora and Tara, she was always perfectly friendly. That just went to show how much of a bond they had formed over the last few months.

Now that he thought back on it, Reina Ruu and Dora must have been seeing one another for years now. He had sold countless bags stuffed with aria and poitan in the post town, and most people of the forest's edge made purchases from his stall.

However, Dora hadn't been distinguishing between them. He had been on guard and tried not to look at their faces any more than necessary, so none of

them had remained fixed in his memory. The most he ever thought about them were things like considering one of the young women to be a bit voluptuous, or thinking how strange it was for a woman to be a hunter.

But now he knew so many people of the forest's edge who treated him kindly. These days, he could casually ask unfamiliar folks who came by his stall, "So, which clan do you belong to?" And though they would generally look surprised at first, they would soon reply with an amicable look on their face.

From what he could recall, he had met Asuta around the end of the green month, so it would soon be five months since then. It felt like a surprise that it had already been five months, yet also that it had only been that long...but at any rate, they had formed such a strong bond over that period.

When he thought back on his first meeting with Asuta, he had a heavy feeling in the pit of his stomach even now. Asuta had an issue with an aria he had been sold, and Dora worked up the nerve to argue back, only for it to turn out that Asuta had been in the right. Dora hadn't wanted to admit fault, having decided that it must have been a groundless complaint because it had come from a person of the forest's edge. He had ended up falling to the ground and begging for his life.

Just what had Asuta and Ai Fa thought when they saw him like that?

It really was depressing to think about.

But even so, Asuta hadn't gotten sick of him and still kept visiting Dora's stall. And then he'd met Vina and Ludo Ruu and learned how they were just friendly, normal people. Then when he had tasted Asuta's amazing cooking, he felt great joy and pride in the fact that his vegetables were the ones being used. At that point, Dora had finally started facing the people of the forest's edge properly, head-on.

If I hadn't met Asuta, would I still look down on the people of the forest's edge even now?

It was difficult to imagine at this point.

But at any rate, Dora *had* met Asuta. And he had talked to not just Reina and Rimee Ruu, but even the leading clan head Donda Ruu. Dora felt truly grateful

for the lot that fate had dealt him.

“What is it, Dora? You look like you’re fretting about something...” Reina Ruu asked with a look of concern as she kept on washing dishes while crouching.

As he gulped down the final bite of giba manju, Dora replied, “It’s nothing. Just... I’m glad that everyone seems to be enjoying themselves so much.”

There were a huge number of people there happily eating away in the space assigned for the outdoor restaurant. Not just southerners and easterners, but a great many citizens of Genos, like Dora. Five months ago, such a sight would have been utterly unimaginable.

The people of the forest’s edge would surely keep on forging bonds with all sorts of people in the future, just like this.

And that thought made Dora truly happy, as if it were something he was personally involved with.

“You say that, but are you sure you weren’t just fascinated by how adorable Reina Ruu is?” Yumi teased, standing up from her seat after finally finishing her meal. “How concerning. I mean, you just called me seductive, didn’t you? Even though your daughter Tara was right there!”

“My,” Reina Ruu said, her eyes opening wide, and then she started to giggle.

“Cut me a break here,” Dora replied, scratching his head once again.

I’ll be reaching a stopping point in my work with the fields soon. When that time comes, maybe we can finally visit the forest’s edge... I’ll have to ask Asuta about that.

Tara and Rimee Ruu were smiling blissfully at one another down at Dora’s feet.

If the day came when all the people of the post town and the forest’s edge could smile together like that...then they could puff out their chests with pride and consider themselves true comrades.

Would such a future arrive in Dora’s lifetime? It was impossible to know, but at any rate, he had no hesitation about continuing down the path he believed was correct.

Group Performance: The Downfall of a Lineage

1

“I just can’t stand that noble...”

It was night, and Zattsu Suun, head of the main Suun house and leading clan head of the forest’s edge, was grumbling in a low voice.

He was currently in his bedroom within the main house, and only he and Tei Suun were present. The clan head’s subordinate found the way that Zattsu Suun was positively filling the space with his brimming rage and irritation to be terribly oppressive.

Earlier in the day, they had visited a manor in the Turan lands to the north of Genos to receive reward money from a noble, and this was what had made Zattsu Suun so indignant. The previous representative of Duke Genos had apparently passed away due to old age, and so from today on a new noble would be in charge of negotiations with the people of the forest’s edge. And wouldn’t you know it, the man who introduced himself as the head of the house of Turan seemed even more unpleasant and troublesome than his predecessor.

“The way the nobles look down on us hasn’t changed one bit, and yet...with that man, it was as if he was staring at wild beasts. Even though he himself was as repulsive as a mundt...”

“In the end, the nobles of the city of stone all have corrupted souls. I can’t see any reason to concern ourselves with that fact,” was the only reply Tei Suun could offer. They only needed to see the nobles four times a year, to receive the reward money, so it made sense to just not worry about them.

“But that coward Zuuro would never be able to stand up to those nobles. And even though he finally had a child, it was a girl...”

“Zuuro Suun is still only eighteen. As he grows older, he will surely gain the

strength needed to act as leading clan head.”

“Do you truly think that coward will ever amount to anything, however much he ages? My life isn’t endless, you know...” Zattsu Suun shot back as the look in his black eyes grew even more intense.

It was true that Zattsu Suun was six years older than Tei Suun, which meant he was currently thirty-seven. He was also about a fist or so taller, and his body was clearly brimming with incredible strength as a hunter. He would surely be able to maintain his position as leading clan head for five or even ten more years.

But it was true that when hunting giba out in the forest, one never knew when death might come, regardless of how much skill one might have. And if that should happen, would Zattsu Suun’s only child, Zuuro Suun, possess the strength needed to lead their people? Despite what he had said, Tei Suun couldn’t help but feel uneasy about it.

“My second and third sons would have been far stronger... Why did the forest have to take them rather than Zuuro?”

“You shouldn’t say such things. If Zuuro Suun lacks the strength needed, then those of us who share blood with him must lend him the support he needs.”

“Hmph... If Zuuro were even half as bold as Migi Suun...”

“Having even half of Migi Suun’s boldness would still make him quite the ruffian.” Though he feared earning Zattsu Suun’s wrath, Tei Suun still felt the need to offer that rebuttal. “Migi Suun has been behaving intolerably of late. At the previous clan head meeting, he caused such a commotion with the members of the Ruu clan that I worried he was going to draw his blade. The Ruu are nearly as powerful as the Suun, so it isn’t wise to go antagonizing them unnecessarily.”

“Do you mean to say the Ruu could usurp our place as the leading clan?” Zattsu Suun questioned, a black flame blazing in his eyes.

As he felt that rage surge over his whole body, Tei Suun desperately shook his head and replied, “No. Even the Ruu would surely never try something so outrageous... But wouldn’t it be wise to forge some blood ties between our

clans?”

“Oh...? You fear the Ruu clan’s strength that much, Tei Suun?” Zattsu Suun asked with a grin like a wild beast as the flickering candlelight illuminated him.

His formidable countenance was as rugged as a rocky mountainside. There were plenty of hunters out there in the Zaza and Dom clans with more intimidating faces. However, Zattsu possessed an overwhelming intensity that far outstripped any of them.

The man was born to be the leading clan head.

He was the ruler of the forest’s edge, stronger and more ferocious than any other.

As Tei Suun felt cold sweat run down his spine he started to answer “No...” with another shake of his head.

However, it was then that they were interrupted by a ridiculous wailing. “Father! Is my father Zattsu there? Father!”

The voice belonged to Zuuro Suun, and it sounded like he was at a complete loss over something or other. Perhaps because his voice surprised her, the infant Yamiru Suun started crying out from some distant room in response.

Though Zattsu Suun’s eyes were now filled with irritation, he didn’t stir. Before long, the door to the bedroom flew open from the outside.

“Ah, father! And Tei Suun... W-We’ve got trouble! S-Some men from the Ruu have barged into the settlement!”

“Ruu men, you say?” Zattsu Suun questioned, grabbing ahold of his blade. “What business could they have with the Suun? Have they decided to take up their swords and snatch away our position as the leading clan by force?”

“I-I don’t know! But there are a whole lot of them! I-It looked like there were around thirty!”

Thirty men... That would mean they had brought along quite a few hunters from the clans under them as well. There were fewer than twenty hunters here at the Suun settlement. If they ended up crossing blades, the Suun would surely fall.

“Those treasonous Ruu devils... If they think numbers like that are enough to take down Zattsu Suun, they can go ahead and try...” the leading clan head scoffed as he slowly rose to his feet. Though Zuuro Suun was a touch larger than his father, he shrank away in fear.

“Leading Clan Head Zattsu Suun, please don’t act rashly. We should start by talking to them and seeing what these Ruu men intend to do by coming here...” Tei Suun said as he also grabbed his sword and stood. At the same time, he was pondering whether the Ruu’s clan head was truly such a wicked man.

It was true that at the last clan head meeting, relations between the Suun and Ruu had worsened even further thanks to Migi Suun’s foolish actions. However, the two groups had immediately dealt with the issue and reconciled. Besides, that had been nothing more than a scuffle between young folks who got a little too worked up, so it would clearly be against the laws of the forest’s edge to take up arms and seek revenge over such a trivial matter.

Has Migi Suun sown the seeds of yet another disaster on top of that one? Tei Suun couldn’t help but feel concerned. However, there was nothing to do now but figure out the truth of the matter.

Leaving the worried women behind, Zattsu, Zuuro, and Tei Suun headed out toward the torchlights at the edge of the settlement.

There were a tremendous number of hunters standing there, facing one another on the east and west. The hunters from the Suun branch houses must have come running as well due to the commotion. However, in the end they amounted to only half as many as were on the Ruu side.

“What is the meaning of this intrusion?!” Zattsu Suun bellowed.

The Suun clan members looked relieved and made way. Instantly, the fury of the Ruu hunters erupted.

“You ask as if you don’t know?! Hand that fool Migi Suun over to us, immediately!” the large figure at the head of the group shouted back just as loudly as Zattsu Suun.

The leading clan head gripped the handle of his sheathed blade and faced the man. “Just who exactly are you? Name yourself for me, the leading clan head of

the forest's edge, Zattsu Suun."

"So you're the leading clan head, are you? I'm the eldest son of the main Ruu house, Donda Ruu."

Though he was still young, the hunter's blue eyes shone brightly. He was about the same height as Zuuro Suun, but his tall figure was splendidly taut and brimming with a hunter's strength.

"Oh, so you're the Ruu heir? So this barbarism has the approval of the Ruu clan head?"

"You say we're the barbaric ones here?! Hurry up and bring us Migi Suun!"

Donda Ruu didn't seem to have drawn his blade yet. But even though Zattsu Suun was like the forest's rage made flesh, this young hunter showed no signs of being intimidated.

Donda Ruu... The eldest son of the main Ruu house, eh?

Tei Suun secretly thought to himself that this youth would surely one day grow into an extraordinary hunter. But in the meantime, he and Zattsu Suun continued to argue.

"What is this about Migi Suun? Are you trying to rehash a matter that's already been settled so you have an excuse to turn your blades on the leading clan?"

"Nothing's been settled! Here you are just talking so casually, Zattsu Suun, knowing nothing of the crime committed by your blood relative. Migi Suun kidnapped a Muufa woman who was engaged to be married! Even if you are the leading clan, such a transgression is beyond unforgivable!"

"A Muufa woman...?" Zattsu Suun growled back, his black eyes blazing wildly.

This was the first that Tei Suun had heard anything about this. And since they had been together all day since the morning, Zattsu Suun couldn't possibly have known either.

"A few days ago, that fool Migi Suun ran into a woman from the Muufa in the post town and pressured her to marry into the Suun rather than the Ruu. She refused him, so now he's resorted to abducting her. Now that we're clear about

what's happened, hurry up and bring that fool and the Muufa woman here right now!"

Zattsu Suun kept glaring up at Donda Ruu, but he also asked his nearby clan members, "Where is Migi Suun?" However, the men from the branch houses on either side of him just shook their heads.

"No one has seen Migi Suun since midday today. After all, the Suun clan is currently in a break period."

"Hmph. So that's why he was drinking so early in the post town, eh?" Donda Ruu roughly interjected. "Whatever you all do on your break period is your business, but it's unforgivable to kidnap a woman who turned down your marriage proposal! Migi Suun must pay for his crimes in order to uphold the order and laws of the forest's edge!"

"That's quite the stirring howl you've got there. But the louder you bark, the more you show your own foolishness, Ruu clan hunter," a chilly voice dripping with malice called out from the darkness.

Donda Ruu swiftly turned in that direction while gripping his blade's hilt.

"Who's there?!"

"That's what I should be asking you. This settlement belongs to the leading Suun clan, after all." A group with an abnormal aura of fervor hanging about them was approaching. When they finally stepped into the light, they revealed themselves to be a group of hunters wearing giba pelt cloaks or skulls over their heads. In other words, men belonging to the Zaza, Jeen, and Dom clans who fell under the Suun. Their numbers seemed to be nearly the same as the Ruu, or around thirty in total. From among the group, the sole man without a pelt or skull over his head stepped forward.

The large man was even taller than Donda Ruu and bulkier than Zuuro Suun, with loose and disheveled hair. His name was Migi Suun. And Donda Ruu seemed to sense that, as the rage in his eyes only grew more intense.

"You're Migi Suun, aren't you?"

"Indeed. I'm the Suun branch house head, Migi Suun."

Migi Suun was the son of Zattsu Suun's elder sister and was the head of one of the four branch houses. But even though he possessed the most robust figure of any of the hunters present, he had only just turned fifteen, and had taken over as head of his house just half a year prior. Beneath his oddly protruding eyebrows, his big eyes had a strange sparkle, causing the hunter to truly look like a wild beast.

"I figured you would get tricked by the Muufa and come brazenly marching over here before long. I was away from the settlement to ask the other northern hunters for their aid. Leading Clan Head Zattsu Suun, my deepest apologies for causing my comrades in the Suun clan to worry unnecessarily."

That ruffian Migu Suun was only ever so careful about his manners around Zattsu Suun. Which was to say, there was no one else in the entirety of the forest's edge that he would abase himself to.

"Can you explain just what in the world this commotion is about, Migu Suun?" Zattsu Suun questioned in a low tone.

Migu Suun bowed his head even deeper. "This is a plot by the Muufa to create strife between the Suun and Ruu clans. A Muufa woman set to marry into the Ruu clan tried to seduce me, of all people."

"Don't insult us with such baseless falsehoods! You're the one who made a pass at the Muufa woman!"

"Oh? What's your basis for saying I'm lying? When I went to the post town the other day, that Muufa woman called out to me. She claimed she was ordered by her clan head to marry into the Ruu, but she actually wanted to become a part of the leading Suun clan," Migu Suun said with a twisted grin crossing his huge face. "Since she was already engaged, there was nothing that could be done about it. I told her she should carry out her duty as a person of the forest's edge and that the strength of the Ruu was growing to match the Suun. I figured that settled matters, but today she snuck away without her clan members noticing and visited my house."

"You bastard!"

"That woman began stripping off her clothing. She told me to take her as a wife so that the Muufa could become a clan under the Suun. And that the Suun

should use their strength to destroy the Ruu for opposing them. It seems the Ruu have been sowing trouble all about, huh?”

By this point, every last Ruu hunter had become as enraged as Donda Ruu. One of them, a youth with dark brown hair standing beside Donda Ruu, shouted out, “That’s enough of your nonsense! Let’s hear the truth of the matter from the woman herself!”

“I’m afraid it won’t be possible to grant that request,” Migi Suun said, turning back toward the Zaza, Jeen, and Dom hunters. A Dom man from the rear of the group stepped forward.

With his burly arms, he was dragging a pulling board with leather straps wrapped around it. Atop that large board was the horrifying sight of a cloth with an unmistakable shape underneath.

The brown-haired youth stood there in utter shock.

“That...can’t be...”

The Dom man casually removed the cloth.

Underneath was exactly what everyone had expected, lying there cold and still.

It was so unbelievably gruesome that Tei Suun looked away without even thinking.

“This fool demanded that if I wouldn’t marry her I should give her my eyes in accordance with the laws of the forest’s edge and came at me with a blade. It’s ridiculous, considering she stripped all on her own, isn’t it? A fool like this isn’t even fit to call herself a woman of the forest’s edge...”

“Bastard!” the youth shouted, moving to leap forward. But before he could, Donda Ruu swiftly grabbed his arm.

“Don’t, Dan Rutim.”

“Why not?! I won’t just let this outrage slide! Look...look at what he did to a fellow person of the forest’s edge!” Dan Rutim’s long brown hair was disheveled as he tried to grab at Migi Suun. Though he looked to be scarcely twenty, his tall figure was brimming with just as much strength and intensity as

Donda Ruu.

“Zattsu Suun, as the leading clan head of the forest’s edge, I would like to hear your judgment on the matter,” Donda Ruu stated calmly despite the fire blazing in his eyes.

Zattsu Suun gave a wicked, devilish smile in return.

“Just as Migi Suun said, such a fool isn’t fit to be called a person of the forest’s edge. There was no option but for her soul to be returned to the forest. It certainly is fortuitous that we learned the truth before this became a more serious matter... If the Suun and Ruu were to fight, it would split the forest’s edge in two, and both sides would be destroyed.”

“I see. So that is your response?” Donda Ruu replied in a voice utterly lacking in emotion, and then he scooped up the body lying on the pulling board with both arms. “I am not in a position where I can determine the path the Ruu clan should take on my own—yet. *That* is what you should all find *fortuitous*...”

“Hmm, I can’t really say I grasp your meaning, but do the Muufa perhaps need to be punished in some way for perpetrating this injustice?”

“We will still forge blood ties with the Muufa, you can be sure of that. And if you attempt to lay a hand on any clan under the Ruu, then you had best be fully resolved to face the consequences.”

Donda Ruu and Zattsu Suun’s glares clashed like lightning. Finally, Zattsu Suun sneered with his teeth bared like a giba’s tusks.

“It certainly is commendable, to take pity on such fools... Out of respect for the profound emotions you hold, I shall overlook the crime you have committed by speaking so rudely toward the leading clan. Pass that along to the Ruu clan head as well.”

After that, the members of the Ruu and their subordinate clans departed while forcing down their fuming rage.

Once they were completely gone from sight, Zattsu Suun turned toward his own subordinate clan members.

“Hunters of the Zaza, Jeen, and Dom, it seems we’ve imposed on you quite a

bit. But thanks to your efforts, the wicked Muufa plot has been thwarted, and the Ruu have been left in shame for their ignorance. You can rest here at the Suun settlement for the night... And allow us to show our appreciation for your efforts by sharing some fruit wine with all of you.”

The hunters all slowly bowed their heads in turn.

There was a strange compelling force behind Zattsu Suun’s words. Even if anyone present had their doubts as to Migi Suun’s claims, they had been wiped away at this point.

Migi Suun wore a faint grin and Zuuro Suun wiped the cold sweat from his forehead while they and the hunters headed to the main Suun house. But when Zattsu Suun went to follow, Tei Suun quickly whispered, “Leading clan head, just how exactly are you planning to handle Migi Suun?”

“Handle him? Migi Suun simply carried out his duty as a person of the forest’s edge. I don’t see any need to reward him for that.”

Tei Suun was at a loss for words.

Migi Suun was utterly lacking in self control, a fact that the members of the Suun clan knew painfully well, so it shouldn’t have been difficult at all for them to sense the truth of what had happened... Did Zattsu Suun truly believe someone from a clan as small as the Muufa was trying to stir up trouble between the Suun and the Ruu?

Zattsu Suun’s lips twisted up into a grin, as if sneering in response to Tei Suun’s doubts. “Really, if Zuuro were even half as capable as Migi Suun, there wouldn’t be any need to worry about the future of the Suun clan... I swear, nothing ever goes right in this world...”

Tei Suun couldn’t find anything to say in response to that.

Thinking back, that night was the start of the Suun clan’s steady march down the path to ruin.

However, it would still be quite some time before Tei Suun would realize that fact.

Six years had passed since that night. By this point, Tei Suun was already thirty-seven years old, and there was a good bit of white starting to mix into his hair. He was the head of a Suun branch house, but his blood ties to the main house had grown rather thin, and at present his family consisted of only his wife and daughter. You could say that his was the weakest house of all within the Suun settlement.

However, Tei Suun served as the leading clan head Zattsu Suun's closest aide. He was simply the most skilled hunter after Zattsu and Migi Suun, and though he had a rather strict and persistently logical nature, the ways that they differed might have been precisely what earned him the leading clan head's favor.

I've never been displeased with that fact before, and yet... Tei Suun thought, offering a prayer in the empty ritual hall.

The unbelievably massive giba skull there was silently staring down on him. It had come from a beast the former clan head had hunted down when the settlement was moved here.

It had been over fifty years now since the former leading clan, the Gaaze, had fallen. Out of their subordinate clans, only the Suun and Ruu possessed the strength needed to take their place.

Since the Ruu only had women in their main house at the time, they readily stepped down and yielded the post to the Suun clan. After that, the Suun and Ruu split off to the north and south respectively and carried out their duty as hunters. This was the story Tei Suun had heard from his father.

So just when exactly had things grown so tense between them?

Naturally, after that reprehensible incident six years ago with Migi Suun and that Muufa woman, the Suun and Ruu clans had started to avoid one another. Relations had deteriorated to the point that it would be difficult for them to ever recover.

I'd imagine the greatest reason was Zattsu Suun growing more and more on guard against the Ruu clan as they keep becoming more powerful...even though they would surely never go against the leading clan without reason. Just where

exactly did we go wrong, I wonder?

Perhaps the quarreling was a result of Zattsu Suun having been born with such overwhelming strength. The leading clan head was incredibly strong. He might not have been all that large, but even if Tei and Migi Suun came at him together, they surely still wouldn't be able to make his back touch the ground.

That strength granted Zattsu Suun the ability to dominate the spirits of others. Even the wild hunters of the Zaza and Dom couldn't help but bow their heads when faced with him. However, there were also those who didn't submit to Zattsu Suun. One such example was the nobles of Genos, and another was the Ruu clan.

With Zattsu Suun, it may not be about right or wrong at all, but rather that he just can't stand anyone who won't yield to him.

The man's feelings in regards to the nobles of Genos and the Ruu clan seemed to have passed into the realm of pure hatred.

If he opposed the nobles of Genos, the land where the people of the forest's edge lived would be taken away.

And if he crossed blades with the Ruu clan, it could very well lead the settlement at the forest's edge to ruin.

And yet in spite of that, Zattsu Suun seemed as if he was always sharpening his fangs in order to rip out their throats at any moment. Or at least, that was how it seemed to Tei Suun.

Mother forest, please let the Suun clan's future be a peaceful one...

As he prayed, a young voice called out from the entrance to the ritual hall.

"So this is where you were, Tei Suun? The leading clan head was looking for you."

Tei Suun turned around with a start. Standing there was a young girl with a pretty face and chilly blackish eyes: the eldest daughter of the main Suun house, Yamiru Suun.

Feeling a strange unease for some reason, Tei Suun rose and faced her. "Zattsu Suun is looking for me? It's almost time for dinner. I wonder, what could

he want?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t say why.”

Yamiru Suun was a girl who never smiled.

Though she had only just turned seven years old, she had a look in her eyes that made it seem as if she could see into people’s hearts and minds. Tei Suun had trouble dealing with her.

“I see. Well then, I suppose I’ll have to ask the leading clan head in person.”

With that, Tei Suun ducked his head and exited the ritual hall. Even outside, the lighting was still dim as the sun was sinking in the west, dying the sky an eerie shade of purple.

And as he moved toward the main house, Yamiru Suun followed along right beside him.

“Something has seemed sort of strange about the leading clan head all day,” Yamiru Suun stated in a flat tone lacking warmth. “I wonder if he’s finally made the decision to destroy the Ruu clan. What should those of us who can’t even hold a blade do, though?”

“The leading clan head would never take up arms without reason, Yamiru Suun. You shouldn’t speak of such violent matters lightly.”

“Oh? But the Ruu are the bitter enemies of our clan, aren’t they? So I can’t see how holding my tongue would change anything.”

Just why had Yamiru Suun grown up to be such a child? Though she lost her mother at a young age, she shouldn’t have wanted for anything in her upbringing as the eldest child of the main house, but somehow this girl seemed to be lacking something important.

It really is hard to believe that she’s Zuuro Suun’s child... But since that means she inherited Zattsu Suun’s blood as well, perhaps it isn’t so strange after all.

Zattsu Suun seemed most proud of Yamiru Suun out of his four grandchildren who had been born so far. In fact, he had lamented, “If only she had been a boy...” countless times.

“Hmm...? What’s that sound?”

As they approached the main house, the wailing of a child came into earshot. It didn't sound like it was coming from the youngest son who had only just been born, though, but rather a boy who was a bit older.

"Migi Suun?! What in the world is going on here?!"

"Ah, Tei Suun, eh? You certainly are late getting here."

Migi Suun was standing there in front of the main house.

In his hand he held a stick meant for firewood...and at his feet were two young crying boys. They were Zuuro Suun's children, Diga and Doddo Suun. The boys were crouched down on the ground and clutching their heads as they sobbed. When he noticed the numerous blue bruises along their arms and necks, Tei Suun was left at a loss for words.

"Ah, this? I've been training them as hunters. If they don't at least end up better hunters than their father, they'll never be able to have any pride as men of the main house."

"That's ridiculous... How could there be a need to train such young children as hunters?!"

Diga Suun was still only five years old, and Doddo Suun was a year younger than that. It was utterly insane to be beating such young children with a stick. But Tei Suun's shouting seemed to only scare the boys more, as they shrieked, "Waah!" and ran away.

"Oh, Yamiru Suun. Your younger brothers sure are weak, aren't they? They'd be fine hunters if only their spirits were as strong as yours, so it really is a shame."

After shooting a chilly glare at Migi Suun's smile, Yamiru Suun abruptly turned and left. And as he watched her go, Tei Suun pressed Migi Suun.

"Explain yourself. What were you thinking, Migi Suun?"

Migi Suun was now twenty-one years old, his large frame brimming with even greater strength and his face having grown ever more beastly. However, at times like this, Tei Suun couldn't falter.

"There's no need to get yourself in such a huff. It's not like I'd go about just

hitting kids on a whim. But it's something that's necessary for the sake of the Suun clan, and the forest's edge as a whole."

"Necessary?! How can you say tormenting those boys is necessary for the sake of the forest's edge?!"

"Come on, stop shouting... The forest's edge needs a new leading clan head to inherit Zattsu Suun's will. And if those boys lack the capability, then it's important to show them their weakness now, right?"

Tei Suun couldn't understand what he was saying at all.

If Zattsu Suun stepped down as leading clan head then he would be succeeded by his only child, Zuuro Suun, and eventually the post would pass to the oldest son, Diga Suun, in turn. No matter what Migi Suun might be plotting, that custom surely couldn't be ignored.

"Zuuro Suun isn't capable of serving as the leading clan head, not in the least. In which case, we should just insist he's ill or something and have him live in seclusion. I'm sure that weakling would gladly step down if it meant he didn't have to head out into the forest as a hunter."

"Even so, the position of leading clan head would simply fall to Diga Suun. Nobody else could steal it, so..."

"But the Suun main house has a fine eldest daughter who comes before that, right? Her weak younger brothers can just marry into some other houses, and then her husband would be qualified to become leading clan head."

There was a greasy, brazen shine in Migi Suun's eyes, and it made an icy chill run down Tei Suun's back.

Did this man truly want the seat of leading clan head *that* badly?

"B-But Yamiru Suun is still just seven years old. It will be quite some time before she's old enough to marry..."

"In eight years she can take a husband. Zattsu Suun is surely healthy enough to last that long, and if push comes to shove, Zuuro Suun can hold the post for a short while. My wife was attacked by a giba and passed away, so it isn't any inconvenience on my end."

“But you and Yamiru Suun are too closely related by blood! She’s the granddaughter of your mother’s younger brother!”

“It’s nothing to go making a fuss over. Haven’t you heard tales of smaller clans turning a blind eye to blood relations being that close?” Migi Suun shot back, a wicked smile remaining fixed to his face. “At any rate, the one to make the final decision will be our leader, Zattsu Suun. Fortunately, he has wanted me to be the next leading clan head for some time now. And if it’s Zattsu Suun’s decision, nobody will complain about it.”

Tei Suun felt as if the ground was slipping out from under him. It was certainly true that Zattsu Suun valued Migi Suun’s strength. The man had said as much, that Migi Suun wouldn’t yield to the Ruu, and could bring prosperity to the Suun...

Tei Suun thought he could hear the sound of something breaking inside of him.

“Well then, shall we get going? We can’t keep the leading clan head waiting forever,” Migi Suun said with a triumphant grin, then he knocked on the door of the main house.

There weren’t any women other than Yamiru Suun belonging to the main house. Therefore, an adult woman from one of the branch houses who had likely come to help man the stove greeted them.

His footsteps heavy, Tei Suun advanced toward Zattsu Suun’s bedroom. When he wanted to discuss something important, the leading clan head would always summon Tei Suun to his personal room so no one could overhear.

“So you’re finally here, Migi and Tei Suun...” Zattsu Suun said in a rumbling voice. The man was already over forty. But even so, his strength didn’t seem to have diminished in the least. His incredible overflowing vitality seemed to fill the room, where there were three men already seated.

“Close the door and sit down. Today I want to discuss a matter of life and death for our clan with all of you.”

Tei Suun was still reeling from the shock Migi Suun had given him, so he just sat down listlessly. Zattsu Suun’s voice mercilessly rang in his ears.

“I have a great deal of concern about the decline our Suun clan has suffered in recent years... Giba have been appearing even at the outermost edge of the forest, and not only men but even numerous women have lost their lives to them. Tei Suun, how many blood relations do we currently have left in the Suun clan?”

“Ah, there are thirty-seven over the age of five in total.”

Children under the age of five weren't permitted to participate in wedding ceremonies or funerals at the forest's edge, and they also weren't counted when totaling up numbers of blood relations.

Zattsu Suun cleared his throat, sounding blatantly irritated. “So we've fallen under forty at last... At this rate, some may start mocking us for being a smaller clan than the Ruu.”

“Yes, but when including subordinate clans, the Suun still surpasses them, so we surely don't fall short of the Ruu in terms of strength...”

“But if we ourselves lack strength, then there's no meaning to that. If the Zaza, Dom, and Jeen were to betray us, we would lack the ability to fight back, wouldn't we?” Zattsu Suun wasn't talking in an especially loud voice, but he was clearly growing angrier and more irritated. “Other clans are growing in number, yet the Suun clan alone is shrinking... It's a truly grave situation, is it not?”

“Surely that's because our Suun clan is carrying out our giba hunting duties more diligently than the other clans. They must simply be running away from giba while focusing on making babies,” Migi Suun opined with a repulsive grin.

Zattsu Suun's blazing black eyes glared at him. “In a way, your words have hit the mark, Migi Suun... As leading clan head, my father built this settlement near the part of the forest where the most giba appeared. Thus it was decided from the very start that we should hunt more giba than any other clan.”

“That's a matter of pride for us as hunters, isn't it?”

By this point, Migi Suun was the only one at the settlement who could talk so lightly to Zattsu Suun. The other three men present kept firmly silent and simply listened to what their leading clan head had to say.

“A matter of pride, is it? But the nobles of Genos make light of that pride. We

put our lives on the line to protect the fields of Genos, and yet...they just pay us some trifling amount and show us no respect, looking down on us as savages.”

Over the past six years, Zattsu Suun’s distrust toward the nobles had only continued to grow stronger. That little mundt-like man who called himself Count Turan had gone and thrown oil onto the burning rage the leading clan head felt.

“To our front we have the nobles of Genos, and to our backs the Ruu clan...and then we have the giba pressing down on us on top of that. At this rate, the glory of the Suun clan will eventually dwindle away...”

“That’s not true. As long as you are our leading clan head, Zattsu Suun, the glory of the Suun will never die.” Migi Suun’s vulgar grin made it abundantly clear that there was an implicit, “and I will carry on that glory after you’re gone,” in that statement.

“Migi Suun... It’s certainly possible that you could prevent the nobles and Ruu clan from getting the better of you...but if our numbers continue to dwindle, we can’t be sure of that. It’s not as if you can take on the whole Ruu clan by yourself, after all...”

“Yes, it’s as you say, but...”

“You needn’t look so uneasy. I simply wish the next leading clan head to inherit the same undiminished glory I did. That’s all.” Zattsu Suun finally broke out in a smile. It was a dreadful grin, like that of some bloodthirsty demon. “For that reason, I’ve devised a plan... But first, I need to know how far your resolve goes, everyone. If it’s for the prosperity of the Suun clan, and our people as a whole in turn, are you willing to violate even the most serious taboos? Can you swear here and now that no matter what happens, you will not doubt my intentions?”

“When you speak of violating taboos, do you mean breaking the laws of the forest’s edge?” Tei Suun questioned, astonished.

The grin on Zattsu Suun’s face remained unchanged. “That’s right... However, we will not be doing this selfishly. Instead, we shall be creating new laws in order to walk the proper path as hunters.”

“Wh-What do you mean?”

“Before I reveal that, I must know... Do you all trust my words?” Zattsu Suun’s raging emotions seemed as if they had become a black blaze, coiling around him. “If any of you betray me, the Suun clan could well be destroyed... And furthermore, this must be kept hidden, even from family, until we have gained enough strength... Are you bold enough to join me in casting aside the old laws and trying to walk a new, more proper path?”

“Of course,” Migi Suun immediately replied. “The leading clan head of the forest’s edge establishing new laws to lead us toward a better future... How could there ever be room for doubt? I, Migi Suun, wish to follow alongside your grand ambition.”

In stiff voices, the three other men also answered, “We will abide.”

Zattsu Suun’s eyes slowly turned toward Tei Suun. Feeling as if that tremendous glare was scorching his very soul, Tei Suun gulped.

“It is...for the sake of our people and their prosperity, and to allow us to follow our proper path as hunters, right?”

“That’s right.”

Tei Suun felt agonizingly conflicted.

It seemed that in order to gain greater strength, Zattsu Suun was prepared to use any method necessary to forge his own path forward and make that ruffian Migi Suun the next leading clan head. Just the thought of it was enough to make Tei Suun tremble.

But then he thought of his wife who had collapsed from illness, and his daughter who was still young. The wife he had chosen had been weak her whole life long. All of their children had passed away young, but their most recent child, Oura, was finally growing up healthy.

If he opposed Zattsu Suun, they would surely be driven from the Suun settlement. They would be unable to rely on the Suun’s subordinate clans, and could end up targeted by members of the Ruu. The Ruu now clearly saw the Suun as enemies...and Tei Suun had long served at Zattsu Suun’s beck and call.

He recalled that hunter, Donda Ruu, who had appeared at the Suun settlement once, six years back. That man would surely never forgive the Suun clan, especially Migi Suun as the killer of that Muufa woman, and Zattsu Suun for permitting the vile deed. There was no way he could stand up against them without Zattsu Suun's backing. When he had failed to question Migi Suun's crimes on that night six years ago, Tei Suun's path had been set in stone.

And so, after what felt like an eternity of agonizing, Tei Suun answered, "I will abide."

"In that case, allow me to explain... This is the proper path forward that we should take."

What Zattsu Suun spoke of next left every single person present astounded.



Pillaging the blessings of the Morga forest... To think, he would speak of breaking such a serious taboo...

Tei Suun stepped out of the main house feeling as if he was struggling through a nightmare. The men who exited alongside him looked dumbfounded as they returned to their respective houses.

Filling their bellies with the fruits of the forest...

Only hunting enough giba to eat...

If they kept that up, eventually the giba would run out of food to eat and would leave the area around the settlement. That was the "proper path" Zattsu Suun had spoken of.

"First, we reclaim the Suun clan's strength. Then we spread these teachings to our subordinate clans such as the Zaza and Dom, and gain the strength needed to crush the Ruu... And finally, we shall make the nobles of Genos submit to us."

Zattsu Suun's words wouldn't leave Tei Suun's head.

"Once we've silenced the Ruu, we'll have all of our people follow this law. Then the giba will overflow from the forest and pillage the fields of Genos. The nobles will finally see just how much they've underestimated our strength... And when that time comes, we shall regain our true pride as hunters."

Zattsu Suun intended to use the giba as a blade to stand against the nobles.

He would spread the fear of giba anew throughout Genos, and present his people as the only ones capable of removing the threat... That was how he would get the nobles to acknowledge the strength of the hunters from the forest's edge.

"Still, first the Suun must accumulate strength. After all, a great many may give in to fear if asked to turn their blades on the lord of Genos... That is why this grand ambition must remain a secret between the six of us alone until we force the Ruu into submission."

Zuuro Suun was not included in those six. It seemed that Zattsu Suun really did intend to make Migi Suun his successor as leading clan head. He would remain in his position for the next eight years until Yamiru Suun could be married, continuing to reign over his people personally all the while.

Zattsu Suun was forty-three years old. If he stopped hunting giba, his life wouldn't be at any risk, but then just what sort of future would await them in eight years? Tei Suun found it difficult to even imagine.

"What's wrong, Papa Tei?" a voice called out from the darkness. When Tei Suun turned to look, he found his daughter Oura standing there. She was holding a large baby in her arms and wore a faint smile.

"Oura... Just what are you doing in a place like this?"

"I finished getting dinner ready, so I came to help take care of Mida Suun over at the main house. Since he cries so loudly, I've been soothing him while taking a walk outside."

Mida Suun was breathing calmly in his sleep. He made for a real armful, to the point that it was difficult to imagine he had only just been born. He looked rather heavy for Oura, who was still only thirteen, but even so, she was still carefully cradling the baby's huge figure.

"The women from branch houses who have been giving him milk keep complaining that it feels like he'll suck them dry and there won't be enough left for their own children. He's sure to grow up to be bigger than anyone," she said, looking lovingly down at Mida.

Just seeing Oura like that was enough to make Tei Suun feel as if his heart was being crushed.

Oura will be forced to break the taboo too... And if the members of other clans discover that, we'll all be scalped.

That was why Zattsu Suun had insisted that they needed to keep this matter completely secret from the other clans until they possessed strength no one could oppose.

Without thinking, Tei Suun had started grinding his molars.

I'll protect my family, if nothing else...

Even so, if the mother forest didn't permit their actions, the Suun clan would be destroyed. Was Zattsu Suun correct, or was he mistaken? Only the forest could judge.

"Mida Suun may well end up a stronger hunter than his big brothers..." Tei Suun said, forcing down the storm of emotions he felt inside.

"Right," Oura said back with a smile.

It was possible that in the next eight years Mida Suun could show signs of being a suitable leading clan head. If that happened, then Zattsu Suun might cast aside his plot to make Migi Suun his successor.

Though Tei Suun had made up his mind to follow Zattsu Suun, he couldn't help but feel that it was far too dangerous to let Migi Suun become the leading clan head. If the truth of the incident six years ago was as Tei Suun believed...then Migi Suun could end up using his authority solely to satiate his own greed, and that was something that could never be permitted.

"Oh, you still haven't returned home, Tei Suun?" Migi Suun called out with a chuckle.

Tei Suun slowly turned toward the source of the voice.

Migi Suun was leisurely exiting the main house. He alone had remained in the bedroom, discussing something with Zattsu Suun.

"Hmm? Who is that girl?"

“I’m Tei Suun’s daughter, Oura Suun. I’m helping out with work at the main house,” Oura replied, fearfully averting her gaze. “Papa Tei, you’re heading home, aren’t you? In that case, I’ll go give Mida Suun back. Hold on for just a moment.”

“Yes, very well.”

Oura took off into the house as if fleeing.

As he watched her small figure depart, Migi Suun broke out in a grin. “Your girl certainly is cute. Give her a few years, and I’m sure she’ll become quite the beauty.”

Tei Suun didn’t say anything in response.

“It’s fun forcing a cheeky girl to submit, but plucking a cute little flower isn’t half bad either. If you’re opposed to me marrying Yamiru Suun, why don’t you offer up your girl instead?”

Tei Suun’s vision went pure red. Without thinking, he reached for his hip. However, his blade was still in the house.

“I’m just kidding. I can’t imagine there being a girl alive worth exchanging the post of leading clan head for. Well, guess I’ll head back for dinner... We’ll only be able to eat those vegetables from town for a little while longer, so better get your fill now,” Migi Suun said with an intolerable laugh, and then he vanished into the darkness.

Though he felt such fury that it was blinding, all Tei Suun could do was stand there in silence.

3

Another four years passed.

Zattsu Suun was now forty-seven, Migi Suun twenty-five, and Tei Suun forty-one... Meanwhile, Yamiru Suun was eleven and Tei Suun’s daughter Oura had turned seventeen.

It would be another four years before Yamiru Suun could take a husband. Ever mindful of that fact, Migi Suun had remained single rather than taking a new

wife.

However, that wasn't to say that Migi Suun was remaining celibate. There were signs that the vicious fool had been assaulting and amusing himself with girls from small clans and even in town. Tei Suun had requested that Zuuro Suun take Oura for a bride in order to protect her from that man's wicked grasp. Fortunately, the nominal heir was fond of well-behaved girls, so he readily accepted.

This would be the fifth time that Zuuro Suun took a bride. For whatever reason, the women who married him all died soon after giving birth. Two of his wives were lost when giba attacked them at the outskirts of the forest. The other two passed away when they couldn't recover after childbirth. That might have simply been because Zuuro Suun had a preference for frail women...or perhaps the anxiety and fear of living together with Zattsu Suun caused them to grow weak. However, their child Tsuvai had been born soon after the marriage, and though two years had passed since then, Oura was still alive. Oura wasn't as weak of a girl as her appearance might have implied. Otherwise, Tei Suun never would have considered having her marry Zuuro Suun.

In the same year that those two married, Tei Suun's wife finally passed away from her illness, so he also became a member of the main house. It was the least he could do to atone, so that Oura wouldn't have to be the only one to suffer.

Any way you looked at it, it was all absolutely wretched.

Tei Suun's first priority would always be making certain that his own family was safe. While he had some vague idea of what sort of rotten means Migi Suun was capable of using to see his ambitions fulfilled, he made no plans to stop the fiend. In the past four years, Tei Suun had lost the will needed to even question what was happening around him.

Over the course of that timespan, the members of the Suun clan had continuously harvested the blessings of Morga. And eventually they had started to sully their hands with even greater crimes too. They had fallen so far that now they were attacking travelers and farms in order to pillage whatever wealth they possessed.

Only six men knew of those crimes, the leading clan head Zattsu Suun included. Supposedly, the fortune they had stolen was meant to bring greater prosperity to the Suun clan.

Because of their harvesting of the blessings of Morga, giba had started disappearing from the area around the settlement. By this point, they were only hunting a few of the beasts each month. By only slaughtering giba caught in traps, their lives were not put at any risk. Now the Suun were able to live in safety and stability.

However, the number of direct blood relations they had still wasn't growing. Not that it ever would have been possible to grow all that much over the course of just four years. It would still be quite some time before they could make the ferocious hunters of the north follow them into battle with the Ruu.

And until that time comes, we need to keep hiding this secret, do we?

But as if that weren't enough, Tei Suun had yet another layer of secrets that he needed to keep even from his family: The pillaging he had engaged in, known only to those six men...and the nobles of Genos.

"You are under suspicion for the crime of pillaging, leading clan head of the forest's edge..." the little man who called himself Count Turan had begun. "If that is the truth, then we will need to punish you in accordance with the laws of Genos... No matter how dissatisfied you may happen to be with the amount of reward money you are given, such crimes simply cannot be permitted..."

"What a ridiculous accusation. If you have proof that we've committed some sort of crime, then you should come out and show it," Zattsu Suun replied with a beastly grin.

Count Turan met that with a mundt-like smile. "There is no such proof... However, I cannot overlook crimes that threaten to bring harm to Genos..."

He then indicated that if they committed further crimes, he would have no choice but to punish someone, even if that meant punishing the leading clan head of the forest's edge. Or at least, that was what Tei Suun had thought upon first hearing his warning.

However, that wasn't the case.

After they received the reward money and exited Count Turan's manor, a man hiding his face approached them.

"The count does not wish to aggravate matters with the people of the forest's edge. Genos depends on the strength of your hunters, after all... So if the people of the forest's edge are seeking greater fortune, then it would be for the best if you only targeted merchant groups that Genos has no interest in."

The man was ridiculously large, and also incredibly suspicious. He wore his hood down far over his head like an easterner, and had a gray cloth wrapped around the lower half of his face. Only his reddish-brown eyes were openly exposed, and they had the exact same sort of tenacious shine in them as Count Turan's had.

"Hmm... I do not know who you are, but do you truly dare to call the proud people of the forest's edge bandits?" Zattsu Suun questioned as he reached for the blade at his hip, only for the other man to step back in a fluster.

"Oh, of course not. I simply wish for the people of the forest's edge to live with as much comfort and ease as possible... No matter what might happen to some merchants who do not work for the benefit of Genos, our soldiers will have no reason to make a move. And fortunately, I just so happen to have a number of such merchants in mind."

He proceeded to teach them the routes for a number of merchant caravans and told them that if they ran across any treasures they would have difficulty dealing with he would help exchange them for coins, after which he hurriedly departed.

"So, is this a plot meant to entrap us, or are they simply trying to incentivize us to act as they wish? It will be quite interesting to see where this leads."

"You can't possibly trust that suspicious man's words, can you?"

"I don't trust him at all. Yet ultimately, I will happily accept the information he offered us."

Zattsu Suun attacked every last one of those merchant caravans. And when he did, he killed everyone present and looted their wealth.

Whether it was a ploy or not, with six hunters on the job, there was never any

chance of failure. Not to mention the fact that two of the six were Zattsu and Migi Suun, who were some of the foremost hunters of the forest's edge.

Tei Suun's blade was also stained with the blood of innocents.

However, the forest still refused to take his soul.

Could that mean this was actually the correct path after all?

Was it as Zattsu Suun said, and their actions would lead the people of the forest's edge toward a better future?

Tei Suun couldn't say.

He could only force his emotions down and swing his blade.

At some point, Tei Suun became a man incapable of feeling anger or sadness.

"The man who leads the soldiers of Genos is putting together a plan to subjugate your people on his own initiative..."

Once that information was delivered, they went and killed the man in the dead of night.

When they held banquets where they invited the clans under them and needed to provide vegetables from town, such as aria and poitan, they would raid the farms to get ahold of them.

Even that sort of crime was not enough to stir Tei Suun's heart.

And while the other of the people of the forest's edge feared Migi Suun's outrageous actions, they knew nothing of just how far the Suun clan's transgressions went.

Then, that day finally came...



"Don't slip up, Tei Suun. We'll finish this when we approach the ravine," Migi Suun whispered as they advanced along a trackless path deep in the forest.

Behind the two of them was a merchant caravan thirty members strong. The group was from Genos, and they were heading for the Eastern Kingdom of Sym. They had seven wagons pulled by two tolos each, which were advancing steadily down the verdant animal trail despite various difficulties.

This merchant caravan was today's target.

Of all things, they had said that they wanted to pass through the forest of Morga in order to head to Sym. To that end, they had asked the Suun clan to guide them.

Packed inside those wagons were mountains of food and treasure to be sold in Sym. There was absolutely no way that Zattsu Suun would allow such an opportunity to slip on by.

"Might this not be a plot to expose our crimes?" Tei Suun had questioned, only for Zattsu Suun to laugh at the idea.

"The merchant caravan said they were tied to the house of Saturas, didn't they? In which case, Count Turan has no reason to concern himself with them..."

Apparently, the house of Saturas was in charge of handling the post town. And to be sure, although Count Turan had brought the matter to Zattsu Suun, he had certainly acted as if he had little interest in the whole affair.

Tei Suun figured why not do as they pleased. They were deep into the woods now, so if the mother forest couldn't forgive his crimes, he would surely receive the punishment he deserved for them. By this point, he only thought to entrust all matters of right or wrong to the forest.

"I had heard the forest of Morga was a place of death, but it's quite beautiful, isn't it?" a flaxen-haired young man called out as they advanced through the forest, where it was dark despite being the middle of the day. But though he was young, he was the leader of this merchant caravan.

In response, Tei Suun nodded back toward the young man holding the reins of a totos. "The forest is a sacred place, as well as our home. Only the townsfolk who lack the strength to live here call it a place of death."

"Right. Still, we aren't encountering many giba around here, are we? Without the fear of giba hanging over us, the forest just feels like a place brimming with life."

"Yes. There aren't many of the fruits giba feed on in this area, and with so many people walking along without hiding their presence, the giba feel on edge

and won't approach."

Those words were no lie.

Even so, this area was the Sauti clan's domain, and they had been ordered to take a day of rest from their hunting. Officially, that was because it would be dangerous if a giba they were chasing ended up coming this way. But the true reason was to keep them from finding out about the violence that was to come.

"Hmm. If there aren't many giba around here, then wouldn't it make sense to clear away the trees and make a path that anyone can use? If you did, then we wouldn't have to trouble you in the future in order to head to Sym like we are now."

"Come on, that's totally crazy. You want to clear a path this deep in the forest?"

That reply had come not from Tei Suun, but rather from the older man who served as the young man's partner. Apparently, this fellow with tanned skin and a fine physique was the vice-leader of the caravan.

The younger of the two turned his way with an earnest smile and said, "The roads connecting Genos and Sym go through a desert filled with poisonous snakes and insects. To be blunt, I'd say there's not much difference in terms of danger between that and the forest of Morga. And going this way makes for a shorter route, which is why we came up with this plan, isn't it? That's exactly why we're here traveling this way."

"Well, it isn't our job to worry about whether or not a path should be cleared. If they think it seems like a good plan, the nobles of Genos will figure it out somehow, I'm sure," the vice-leader said with an exasperated chuckle. The two must have shared a deep, trusting relationship. Though they looked like ordinary townsfolk, there was an incredibly strong light shining in their eyes. These merchants certainly had to have some guts to try passing through the dangerous forest of Morga for the distant land of Sym.

"Ah, the ravine has come into view," Migi Suun said from the head of the group, holding back a grin. Sure enough, a rugged yellow rocky surface was visible to the right. "You should go ahead and use the giba warding fruit now. This area is dangerous enough that we really can't afford to have giba attack

us.”

The young group leader nodded, then signaled to his allies behind him. A number of red fruits were brought out of one of the wagons and passed around from one man to another.

However, they weren't giba warding fruits, but rather giba summoning fruits.

The plan was to use the aroma to draw in giba, so that they would wipe out the whole merchant caravan.

Among the group of thirty in the merchant caravan, nearly half of them were bodyguards hired with coins. None of them looked to be especially skilled, but Zattsu and Migi Suun had decided to use this cunning scheme in order to be all the more certain.

However, Zattsu Suun wasn't participating in this attack. He had started feeling unwell a few days ago. In just three more years, the man would turn fifty. It was hard to believe that Zattsu Suun might die before his ambitions were fulfilled...but even so, a shadow of doubt had been cast over their endeavors, where none had existed before.

As such thoughts meandered through Tei Suun's head, the flaxen-haired young man turned his way.

“So we just need to crush this and coat ourselves in the juices, correct?”

“Yes. The shell is rather tough, so you should use the bottom of a knife or something similar to crack it open.”

The young man did as he was told and swung the butt of a knife's handle down on the fruit resting in his palm. With a thud, the red shell was smashed in and a small amount of scarlet juice sprayed out like smoke.

“Ack, that sure is a powerful smell. It's as sweet as a flower from Jagar.”

“It seems like it won't just cling to our bodies, but to our hair and clothing too.”

Tei and Migi Suun casually stepped back. It wouldn't be enough to escape from the scent, but at least it was a good deal better than getting it coated in it.

Giba summoning fruit didn't just draw the beasts in, but also made them

more vicious, which is why it was so incredibly dangerous. In days long past, there was a technique that used it to draw giba to yourself called sacrificial hunting, but the risks were too great to justify and the practice had died out.

“All right, now let’s move out before the scent weakens,” Migi Suun ordered, and the group proceeded onto the rocky surface.

To their right was a precipice, and on their left was woodlands. If they continued along this stony tract for half a day or so, they would safely make it out of the forest.

However, this was not to be.

Around half an hour or so later, the hoofbeats of death and destruction sounded out.

“Hmm? There seems to be some sort of commotion out in the forest...” the large man who served as the vice-leader said, mere moments before a massive giba leaped out of the forest on the left.

It had lost all sense thanks to the scent of the giba summoning fruit. The beast hurtled forward over the edge of the cliff, plummeting down to the bottom and taking one of the dumbfounded men who had been standing there along with it.

“G-Giba!” the men started shouting in fear as Tei and Migi Suun ran along the rocky surface. As per the plan, their other three comrades had coated themselves in giba summoning fruit and led the beasts here.

After moving to a safe distance, Tei Suun came to a stop and turned around.

The sight that awaited him truly was something out of a nightmare.

Roughly ten giba were running the men down. The gibas’ sharp horns and tusks were tearing into flesh and sending gouts of blood flying through the air. A number of men had taken the charging giba head-on and fallen off the cliff.

Some of the tolos attached to the wagons suffered the same fate. Others panicked and ended up trampling a few of the merchants, or ran them over with the wagons.

“Whoa!” Migi Suun called out as he leaped backward. Not a moment later, a

giba appeared from the forest to his side.

It seemed some amount of the scent had gotten onto the two of them as well. With a wide grin, Migi Suun swung his sword. The blow shattered the giba's skull. Even after four years of fooling around, his muscles showed no signs of having weakened in the slightest.

"It's been a while since I've hunted giba! Now then, how about I indulge in some of the forest's vitality?"

As the giba twitched and spasmed, Migi Suun grabbed hold of its pelt and lifted its short and stout figure over his head. The fresh blood spurting from its crushed skull stained Migi Suun's massive body red.

This was also an old custom for taking the life force of the forest inside oneself. But even at the Suun settlement, only Zattsu and Migi Suun continued with the tradition. As he considered that, Tei Suun realized that he himself had stopped praying to the forest at the ritual hall...

It was then that Migi Suun groaned, "Urgh! The leader of the caravan is trying to flee into the forest!"

When Tei Suun turned to look, he saw the young man with his flaxen hair stained red running into a thicket. A number of arrows came flying at the merchant from atop the trees, which must have come from their comrades who had led the giba here. Naturally, they had gone up the trees that bordered the rocky tract in order to escape from the beasts.

"Did they get him? We can't let even a single one escape!"

Migi Suun tossed the giba's corpse to the ground and took off running that way. Though one of the giba that had been running wild atop the rocky ground came after him, it met its end from a single swing of Migi Suun's blade. And with that, he also disappeared into the forest.

I suppose it's about time... Tei Suun waved his hand toward his comrades atop the trees.

Now the grigee arrows flew toward the giba on the rocks. One by one, their tremendous death cries rang out across the ravine.

Of the nearly ten giba in total, some collapsed on the ground, while others fell down the cliff. Once they had stopped moving, Tei Suun slowly approached to survey the scene.

Giba, toots, and human corpses were piled there in heaps. The sweet scent of giba summoning fruit mixed with the thick smell of blood, making for an overwhelming stench. However, Tei Suun could no longer be moved by such things. His allies who came down from the trees all had eyes like those glass orbs made in Sym as well.

“After you empty out everything from inside, push the wagons down to the bottom of the cliff. And just to be safe, be sure to pull out all the arrows.”

“Right.”

His comrades silently got to work. Meanwhile, Tei Suun started checking for any survivors. It would take half a day to make it back to town from here. Even if soldiers from Genos were dispatched to confirm the truth of any reports that might be made, they wouldn't arrive until tomorrow. The carrion-eating mundt would have consumed everything by that point.

Just where will the souls of townsfolk attacked by giba and eaten by mundt return to? Tei Suun thought to himself as he approached yet another corpse...or at least, what he thought was a corpse before the man grabbed him.

“Wha...?!”

“You damn traitor! You deceived us!”

It was the vice-leader of the group.

The man's bright, intense brown eyes were glaring at Tei Suun with overwhelming hatred. With blood gushing from his stomach, he wrapped his hands around Tei Suun's throat.

“May disaster befall the cowardly people of the forest's edge! We... We trusted in you!”

“Let go... You were fools for believing in us!”

Tei Suun shoved the man away half on instinct. But in that moment, the man just so happened to have a hold on Tei Suun's necklace of horns and tusks, and

it was torn from his body.

With the glare of a man driven mad with pure hatred, the vice-leader fell to the bottom of the cliff.

Yes... You were fools for believing in the Suun clan. Tei Suun repeated his earlier words in his heart.

Then one of his comrades called out from behind him. “Tei Suun, should we leave the giba corpses too?”

“Yes. If there are no giba bones left behind, it could cast suspicion on us as their guides. Leave them here, and don’t remove the horns or tusks.”

“Understood. By the way, Migi Suun still hasn’t returned, has he?” the man replied, at which Tei Suun looked over toward the forest.

It was hard to imagine that injured man being able to flee very far, but now that he thought about it, it was true that Migi Suun should have been back by now.

“I’ll go take a look. You three finish things up here.”

With that Tei Suun stepped into the thicket. There were drops of the young man’s blood spattered on the grass, leaves, and tree trunks.

“Where are you, Migi Suun?”

There was no response.

His fingers grasping the hilt of his blade, Tei Suun carefully pushed forward into the depths of the forest.

The places where the foliage was trampled showed where they had been. And that trail stretched surprisingly far.

“Migi Suun?”

Tei Suun kept going, prepared for a giba attack should one come.

It wasn’t until his comrades were completely out of view that he finally heard a weak voice call out, “Tei Suun... Over here...”

Tei Suun hurried forward, then peered around the large tree in front of him. When he did, his eyes shot open wide in shock. Migi Suun was sitting there,

leaning up against the trunk of the tree. Beside him were the corpses of a massive giba and the young man. Furthermore, there was a silver dagger stabbed halfway into Migi Suun's stomach.

"Migi Suun, what happened?"

"I screwed up... Just when I had caught up to him and grabbed him by the neck, this giba rammed into me... Just when I finished it off, the kid used the chance to stab me in the stomach..."

Even so, it was the giba and the caravan leader who had ended up dead. The giba's skull was smashed, while the young man's neck was broken.

As he sat there powerless, Migi Suun grinned.

"The wound in my stomach is nothing. I mean, it didn't make it to my guts... But thanks to this giba, I seem to have broken several ribs..."

Even with multiple broken ribs, he had managed to smash a giba's head in and snap that young man's neck? Feeling horrified for the first time in a while, Tei Suun looked down at the young man's corpse.

His fingers had raked the ground pitifully. His flaxen hair was stained with blood, and red droplets had run down his cheeks like tears. With his eyes closed, his face somehow looked more youthful than when he had been alive.

But this young man...he said he had family he left behind in Genos.

The young man had given Tei Suun a pained smile, saying that around when he had started preparing for this job, he learned that his wife was with child. But he had thought that if he hurried back from Sym, then maybe he would be able to return home in time for the birth.

However, his eyes would never open again.

Those fingers that now looked like snapped claws would never hold his child.

"Ugh, how annoying... To think that a mere townspeople tried to injure me... I'm the man who will be the next leading clan head of the forest's edge... If my legs would just work right, I'd stamp on that disgusting face of his..."

Tei Suun slowly turned to face Migi Suun. "Migi Suun, don't you think we should remove that blade as soon as possible and have you treated? It could

prove fatal if you get a bad infection.”

“Hmm, but my fingers lack the strength... I used it all up finishing these two off...”

“I see. Well then, allow me to pull it out for you.”

Tei Suun leaned down and grabbed the handle of the dagger in Migi Suun’s stomach.



It was late at night by the time Tei Suun made it back to the settlement.

Holding a torch purchased from town, he approached the main Suun house. As he did, he saw a dark shadow curled up in front.

“Who’s there? Mida Suun?”

“Yeah...”

It was the youngest son of the household, Mida Suun. Though he had only just turned four, he looked about twice that age. The boy was oddly large and also round and plump, like a ball of meat.

“What are you doing out here? Were Diga and Doddo Suun picking on you again?”

“Yeah...”

Diga and Doddo Suun had become the sort that picked on those who were weaker than them. Even at such a young age, they’d had it driven into their heads that the strong could treat the weak however they pleased.

“Even so, you can’t just keep crying all the time. Didn’t I tell you before that you should talk to Zuuro Suun and Oura when things are tough?”

“Yeah...” Mida Suun’s little pale-colored eyes stared up at Tei Suun.

Tei Suun couldn’t read what Mida Suun was thinking whatsoever. Neither could the boy’s father, Zuuro Suun. The only one who seemed to understand the boy even a little was Oura, who had looked after him since he was even younger than he was now.

“At any rate, you should come back inside with me. The night wind isn’t good

for you. Diga and Doddo Suun must be asleep in their own rooms by now, right?”

“Yeah...” Mida Suun’s round body slowly rose. All the while, his eyes never stopped staring at Tei Suun. “Tei Suun...are you okay?”

“Hmm? Why do you ask?”

“Well...you just look really sad...”

Tei Suun was left at a loss for words.

He felt as if some small animal had inexplicably started talking to him.

Just what did the world look like through those young eyes? Tei Suun couldn’t even fathom.

“I’m fine. Now come along, let’s go in...”

“Okay...”

After putting out the torch, Tei Suun opened the door to the house. When he did, he found Oura sitting there alone in the main hall.

“Papa Tei, and Mida too... Weren’t you sleeping in your room, Mida?”

“No, I was outside...”

“I see. I was in my room soothing Tsuvai, so I didn’t notice at all. You’re still young, so you shouldn’t go out at night on your own, Mida.”

“Okay...”

Oura gave a faint smile.

Tsuvai, who had only just turned two, was sleeping away in her arms.

“Good work today, Papa Tei... How did things go?”

“Mmm,” was all Tei Suun could reply with.

Oura’s eyebrows slumped sadly. “Papa Tei, there’s something I wanted to discuss with you...”

“Save it for later. I have to go see the leading clan head now.”

“But Papa Tei...”

“Oura, you’re the wife of the clan head’s heir, Zuuro Suun. And you’re a mother to a young daughter as well, so you shouldn’t speak so childishly,” Tei Suun stated as he removed his leather footwear. “At least call me father...or even just Tei Suun. With my weak blood ties, I am the lowest of anyone here at the main house, so from now on, I shall refer to you as Oura Suun.”

As Oura deeply hung her head, she hugged the child in her arms tightly.

“Very well...father.”

“Good.”

Leaving Oura and Mida Suun behind in the main hall, Tei Suun headed for Zattsu Suun’s bedroom. But just as he was about to knock on the door, it opened from the inside.

“My, Tei Suun...” It was Yamiru Suun. The girl was now eleven years old, and she wore a chilly smile as she shut the door. “So you finally made it back. How was your work guiding that merchant caravan?”

“The leading clan head should be telling everyone about that tomorrow morning.”

Last year when Yamiru Suun turned ten she had switched from wearing children’s attire to that of a woman, and Tei Suun started talking to her differently.

The edges of Yamiru Suun’s lips raised in an even more pronounced grin. She never used to smile at all, but even now that she did, it was always with such a cold look on her face.

“The leading clan head seems to be doing quite poorly. Come tomorrow, it’s questionable as to whether or not he’ll even be able to walk on his own two feet.”

Yamiru Suun had also grown unusually tall for her age. Her face and build were oddly mature as well. On top of that, her blackish eyes had only grown more and more chilly with age.

“Even so, I’m sure it will still be some time before his soul departs... He laughed and said he would make sure to live at least long enough to see me

take a husband.”

“Is that so?”

“Where is Migi Suun? Did he return home without even offering a report?”

“The leading clan head should be telling you about that tomorrow morning as well...”

“Hmm?” Narrowing her eyes doubtfully, Yamiru Suun turned to leave. “Well, whatever. I expect to never have any reason on my end to interact with that man... Well then, have a good night, Tei Suun.”



After watching her graceful figure depart, Tei Suun knocked on the door.

“It’s Tei Suun. I’ve just now returned.”

“You may enter...”

As soon as he entered the room, he was met with a burning glare.

Zattsu Suun really did seem to be doing even worse than he had been in the morning. His cheeks looked a bit emaciated, and the areas under his eyes were becoming sunken. But as for his eyes themselves, the tenacity and vitality brimming from them remained just the same as always.

“You’re rather late... You didn’t fail, did you?”

“No, we didn’t. We carried out our task. However...”

When he heard what Tei Suun said next, Zattsu Suun’s eyes shot open wide. It was the first time Tei Suun had ever seen the man look so openly shocked.

“What? Say that again...”

“Yes, clan head,” Tei Suun said with a nod. “Unfortunately, Migi Suun perished out in the forest. He was stabbed in the stomach by a member of the merchant caravan, and his innards were gouged out.”

Just where exactly would his actions take the Suun clan?

He didn’t care enough to even try imagining.

4

Ten more years had passed.

Zattsu Suun had fallen ill, Migi Suun had perished out in the forest, and Zuuro Suun became the next leading clan head, continuing the Suun clan’s fall to corruption.

However, it wasn’t as if Zattsu Suun’s tenacity had simply faded away to nothing. Though his hair had fallen out and he had become nothing but skin and bones, always chewing on the forbidden leaves, that resolute blaze still hadn’t disappeared from his eyes.

“Strength... If we can just keep building up strength...until the day this illness of mine is healed...”

The Suun settlement continued to be bound by the laws that Zattsu Suun had established. Ultimately, though the role of leading clan head ended up falling to Zuuro Suun, nothing else had changed. And in the meantime, the children of the main house had all grown up.

Yamiru Suun became a girl with the smile of a poisonous snake.

Diga Suun was now nothing but an embodiment of pure vanity.

Doddo Suun was a weakling who could do nothing without drinking wine.

Mida Suun only seemed to have an interest in eating.

And Tsuvai Suun had come to believe that a person’s worth was determined by the coins that they earned.

As for the new leading clan head Zuuro Suun, though he remained weak-willed, he began putting on an air of superiority...while Oura and the members of the branch houses all now had eyes like glass orbs.

No one living in the Suun settlement could escape Zattsu Suun’s control. But despite his wishes, the Suun clan’s strength wasn’t growing. Instead, many of their people seemed to grow infirm younger than expected, as if trying to escape their former clan head’s forceful will.

At first, there was a concern that the blessings of Morga might be poisonous to humans. Later on, it was suggested that the issue might have been the fact that they had to eat giba innards due to how few of them they were hunting. But eventually, everyone just stopped caring. If this was the penance demanded by the forest, they simply had to abide by that... It seemed like everyone had started thinking that way, even without having spoken about it with each other.

At any rate, the members of the main house had the same diet as the others, and aside from Zattsu Suun, they were all quite healthy, so the issue had to lie elsewhere. In Tei Suun’s view, this was simply the natural end for those who lost the will to live.

The men who had committed all those crimes alongside Tei Suun had also

passed away one after another, and now he was the only one left. Raiding farms or merchant caravans was no longer possible, and the fortune they had amassed was getting used up bit by bit to purchase meat and wine.

The Suun clan kept on stumbling down the path of decline and corruption.

And at long last, the night of their destruction arrived.



“From now on, you three will be living here,” the head of the Dom clan, Deek Dom, stated.

They were currently at the Dom settlement. Beside Tei Suun stood Diga and Doddoo Suun. Though, actually, they had already had the Suun name stripped from them, so they were simply Tei, Diga, and Doddoo. Their arms and legs were bound with leather straps, and they had been made to stand before the Dom clan head.

“Slay giba as hunters of the forest’s edge. Living proper lives is the only way that you can atone.”

Though he still wasn’t quite seventeen yet, Deek Dom already possessed the strength and appearance of a true clan head. As the man’s blazing black eyes glared at them, Diga and Doddoo trembled.

The Suun clan had fallen.

Over half of the people from the branch houses were still living at the settlement, but their time as the leading clan had ended for good. The members of the main house had their clan name taken from them, the members of branch houses with outside blood relations joined those clans, and Zattsu and Zuuro Suun were set to be judged as criminals.

After notice was sent to Genos, the two of them would surely be scalped. Zattsu and Zuuro Suun would pay for the innumerable crimes of the clan with their lives. Everyone else was simply ordered to live in a correct and proper manner from now on.

“Starting tomorrow, we’ll be having you join us as hunters. If you are able to reclaim your pride as people of the forest’s edge through your work, then you

have my word that you will be granted the Dom name.”

With their limbs still bound, the three of them were led to a Dom branch house where they would be sleeping, with all three of them packed into a single small room. Doubtless, there were men keeping watch in shifts stationed outside the door.

As they lay there illuminated by the moonlight streaming in, Diga and Doddo still looked befuddled. Tei couldn't blame them. He could barely comprehend the circumstances he found himself in either.

The Suun clan had fallen.

He had believed the Suun would never collapse as long as Zattsu Suun's deep-seated grudge kept smoldering under their feet, and yet all of a sudden it just happened in the course of a single night.

Of course, it wasn't as if he had no suspicions that such a day might come. When Zattsu Suun fell ill and Migi Suun perished, the Suun clan's fate was sealed.

So long as there was no true successor to Zattsu Suun's will, there was no chance for the clan to live on. It had already been fourteen years since they had started pillaging the forest of Morga, and for all that time, the Suun clan had forbidden sending any members to marry into their subordinate clans in order to protect their secret. The way they were going, they were sure to eventually earn the distrust of the clans under them and either be abandoned or have their actions exposed.

However, the Suun had fallen long before such a thing had had a chance to occur. It was the Ruu and Fa clans who brought it about. Truthfully, it was just the Fa clan, with only two members to its name, that actually took them down. The Ruu just lent their support.

But...is that truly the case?

Certainly, the Fa clan had proven that they possessed the strength needed to destroy the Suun. However, the one to invite them to the Suun settlement was Yamiru Suun. Though now she was just Yamiru.

So was Yamiru perhaps the one who had actually brought about their end?

Had she used Zuuro Suun's coveting of the Fa clan's fortune against him and manipulated Diga and Doddo's rotten desires in order to bring about the end of their clan?

Even if that is the case, there's nothing strange about it.

Zattsu Suun had fixed his gaze on her at a young age, and she had been pressured to one day marry Migi Suun, meaning she had personally suffered from the obsessions of the Suun. As a result, Yamiru's only options were to accept everything they had done and reign over the Suun clan or to see it utterly destroyed. Any other path she chose would simply be digging her own grave, and it was hard to imagine Yamiru of all people walking such a path.

The Fa clan is taking steps to make it so giba meat can be exchanged for coins in order to bring prosperity to the forest's edge... Zattsu Suun trampled over countless taboos in his pursuit of power, but they are attempting to gain it while living properly as people of the forest's edge.

Tei had no idea how many years such a roundabout method would take to produce results. However, in fourteen years, the Suun clan had accomplished absolutely nothing at all.

Just what had the Suun gained from devouring the blessings of Morga, casting aside their work as hunters and indulging in comfort? All it had done was produce a weak clan that had discarded its pride as people of the forest's edge. And even when they were freed from the threat of giba, there were still so many who lost the will to live that the number of their blood relations hadn't even risen significantly.

If the Fa clan's idea succeeded, there would be fewer deaths from starvation, and the people of the forest's edge could very well grow in strength from it, finding their pride as hunters bolstered along the way. The Fa truly were a clan perfectly suited to destroying the Suun.

But is such a thing truly possible? Tei faintly thought as he squatted down in the dark room.

Tei and the members of the main Suun house had also eaten the cooking from the Fa clan that had been served at yesterday's clan head meeting.

The giba meat with its stench removed and poitan that was cooked flat rather than boiled were strange dishes. They were produced by the women of the Suun branch houses following the instructions given by Asuta of the Fa clan.

Those foods truly were surprising.

However, the members of the Suun clan knew the taste of the meats sold in the post town. Especially those of the main house, who foisted all giba meat with its terrible stench upon the branch houses, and generally just ate karon and kimyuus.

The cooking Asuta and the others had made was even more delicious, though... Could it possibly stir even the hearts of the townsfolk?

Tei couldn't say.

The only thing he knew now with any certainty was that the Suun clan had fallen.



The following day, they were sent out giba hunting just as Deek Dom had declared they would be.

They were released from their leather bonds and given hunter's cloaks and swords, at which point Diga and Doddo went deathly pale. The two of them had never properly hunted giba.

"Still, you've at least taken down giba caught in traps, haven't you? So let's have you start off with that."

There were seven hunters in the Dom clan, which was less than Tei had expected. They all wore giba skulls and had fine physiques, but none of them seemed to be especially old. In all likelihood, there were a large number of giba here around the northern settlement, just as it had once been for the Suun, so the men surely all perished out in the forest before they could reach middle age. Even now, they were living the sort of lives filled with danger that the Suun had cast aside.

"All right, let's get going."

With that order from Deek Dom, they stepped into the forest.

Once they were inside, they soon split into two parties. Four of the hunters accompanied Tei's group, while the other three separated from them.

Deek Dom was included in their group. If they showed any signs of trying to flee, the man was surely prepared to bring his blade to bear and purge them. His muscular form seemed to be brimming with every bit as much vitality as Migi Suun's once had.

The Ruu clan head, the head of the Rutim, Deek Dom, Gulaf Zaza...and that female hunter from the Fa, and even the youngest Ruu son... To think that there were such strong hunters outside of the Suun settlement.

There was no way that the Suun could have fought back against them.

Had the Suun clan been fated to fall for the past ten years? Ever since Zattsu Suun fell ill and Migi Suun died?

If that's the case, then our downfall was assisted not only by Yamiru, but by me as well...

As those thoughts ran through Tei's head, they advanced down the trackless path, only for Deek Dom to eventually give the silent signal to halt. Diga and Doddo looked all around in sheer terror.

Not a moment later, a giba suddenly came leaping out of the forest. The beast looked to be starving. Its eyes blazed bright with anger, and it seemed to have lost its senses as it charged the group.

"Eeeeeek!" Diga shrieked as he cowered.

Tei leaped over the youth's back and swung his sword. The steel blade dug deep into the beast's neck. However, Tei lacked the strength needed to fell a giba with a single blow. He twisted his body to the left while holding tight so that the blade wouldn't be pulled away from him.

The giba slipped past Tei's side, spurting red blood as it went. Deek Dom was standing directly in its path. The Dom clan head countered the beast's charge by dodging to the side and swinging his sword down as he went. The blade sliced into the giba's neck on the opposite side of Tei's strike.

The impact had surely broken its spine. Flipping head over hooves, the giba

fell flat in the thicket. The remaining three hunters then leaped forward and immediately dealt the finishing blow.

“You handled yourself quite well,” Deek Dom called out while flicking the blood from his sword. “Tei, you haven’t carried out your duty as a hunter for years, same as the others, correct?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“And from what I hear, you’re already over fifty years old. When you take all that into consideration, the ability you showed just now was quite impressive.”

Tei could find no words to offer in response.

Zattsu Suun had ordered him to not neglect his training for the sake of the days to come. All he had done was follow that order with dedication, nothing else.

“You may well be able to walk the proper path as a hunter once more.”

It was difficult to tell from Deek Dom’s tone what he was feeling in that moment, or as he was shifting his gaze over to the other criminals. Diga was cradling his head as he cowered on the ground, while Doddo just sat there looking dumbfounded. It was almost as if they had returned to the times when Migi Suun would beat them as children.

“I hate this... I’ll never be able to hunt! Please, just leave me alone!”

“What are you talking about? Would you prefer to be scalped as a criminal instead, then?” Deek Dom asked, sounding perplexed.

“Eek!” Diga shrieked again as he balled up even further.

“Deek Dom, Diga and Doddo have followed the customs of the Suun clan from a young age. They have never had any chance to develop their pride as hunters,” Tei said, to which Deek Dom slowly turned his way.

“Even so, it’s not as if we can have them work around the house like women. They need to live proper lives as men of the forest’s edge.”

“That’s certainly true. But if you intend to train them as hunters, you must understand that it is no different from doing the same for a townspeople.”

“Making a townspeople into a hunter... It seems we have quite a trial ahead of us,” Deek Dom said with a deep sigh, but there was a strong look in his black eyes. “But that’s our punishment for having overlooked your crimes. Hey, Diga...” the Dom clan head bellowed as he grabbed Diga by the nape of his neck and easily lifted him to his feet. And as the youth tried to avert his gaze, Deek Dom brought his face in close. “Look me in the eyes and answer... Are you afraid of giba?”

“E-Eek!”

“Answer me. Are you afraid of giba?”

“I-I am...”

“When a boy turns thirteen, the first thing he must do is learn the terror of facing a giba directly. Which means you’ve finally taken the first step toward becoming a hunter,” Deek Dom stated, his black eyes blazing bright. Though their color was the same as Zattsu Suun’s and they were every bit as intense, they really didn’t seem alike at all. “When I first entered the forest and experienced that fear, I couldn’t stop myself from trembling, and it has only been three or four years since then. With enough time, you two should be able to gain the strength needed to become hunters as well.”

Diga didn’t say anything in response.

“Live resolutely and atone for your crimes. As long as you don’t disregard those two duties, we won’t give up on you.”

With that, Deek Dom shoved Diga away, and once again the former heir pitifully crumpled to the ground.

“We’ll hang the giba we finished off from a tree for now so that the mundt don’t gnaw on its pelt. Start by helping out with that.”

Diga offered no answer.

“Can you not hear what I’m saying?”

Diga and Doddor slowly rose to their feet, their faces pale. After watching them get up, Deek Dom turned back toward Tei.

“You help too, Tei. You know how to tie a rope, don’t you? Go ahead and

teach them how it's done."

"Yes, understood."

This fierce young clan head of the Dom might actually be capable of leading Diga and Doddo down the proper path, Tei thought to himself as he walked over to the felled giba alongside his former relatives.



What exactly should I be doing?

Tei simply couldn't get to sleep that night. Even he couldn't help but feel worked up, between the excitement of hunting for the first time in quite a while and the anxiety brought on by the sudden upheaval in his living situation.

Diga and Doddo were sleeping like logs. They didn't get attacked again after the first encounter, so they wrapped up their work by simply finishing off any giba they found in their traps. But even so, that ended up being a task that used up every last bit of energy the pair possessed.

They had been training as per Zattsu Suun's orders as well, but they hadn't properly headed out into the forest even once. All they had done was halfheartedly watch as Tei and Mida slaughtered whatever got caught in the traps they set up.

It wasn't possible to develop a hunter's spirit solely by training to climb trees or compete in contests of strength. But now they had learned to fear the forest for the first time. It was a fear that led men to learn respect for the forest and build up pride as hunters. It was crucial to know not just with your mind but your very body that you were nothing but another part of the forest as a whole.

Yes, Deek Dom might be able to guide those two down the proper path.

But...where did that leave Tei?

Starting life again as a proper person of the forest's edge? Do I truly have the right to do so?

Tei's hands had been stained with the blood of innocents. At this point, Zattsu Suun was the only other person left who was aware of that fact. And if he were executed...then Tei would be the last.

Even if my crimes are revealed, it surely wouldn't cause trouble for Oura or Tsvai at this point. Our ties have already been severed, and even if that were not the case, they never knew anything about what we did in the first place.

In that case, he should just go ahead and confess to the full extent of the crimes he and Zattsu Suun had committed over the years.

If Tei did so, then he would surely be purged as well.

Now that the Suun had fallen, the only option left was to leave the future of the forest's edge to the new leading clans. The Ruu, Sauti, and Zaza would surely be able to resist the nobles of Genos in their own way. And if even their strength came up short and the people of the forest's edge ultimately fell...then that would simply be the will of the forest. At any rate, it had nothing to do with Tei.

And yet... Tei thought to himself, staring at his palm in the dark.

It was an old hand, dry and cracked.

Yet it still felt the sensation of cutting into a giba.

He had swung his blade not to finish off a giba that was already hanging, but rather one brandishing its horns and tusks. Just how many years had it been since he did so?

Even the giba were simply another part of the forest. The people of the forest's edge bore no hatred toward the beasts. They simply clashed against one another, and the victor obtained the vitality needed to survive another day. If one's strength came up short, then their soul returned to the forest. That was simply how it was, and both the people of the forest's edge and the giba were equally children of the mother forest.

Tei had been thoroughly reminded of the excitement, the rush he used to feel from that clash. If he were allowed to keep on carrying out his duty as a hunter until his strength gave out, just how blessed would he be? To live that way alongside Diga and Doddo, even while thinking of his former family he had been separated from...

But I cannot be permitted such comfort.

Even when struck by such a profound sense of want that it shook his very soul, Tei still forced down those thoughts.

If Zattsu Suun was judged, then Tei would also confess on that very day. He had no right to be forgiven.

But just as he thought that, a strange sensation crept up Tei's spine.

Before he could even wonder what it was, he heard a woman shrieking.

"It's a fire! The Dom settlement is burning!"

Tei sluggishly rose.

At the same time, the door was violently wrenched open from the outside.

"What are you doing, sleeping at a time like this?! You're men of the forest's edge, aren't you?!"

It was the eldest daughter of the main Dom house, Lem Dom. She was tall, with a robust build, and she held a knife in one hand as she stepped inside. Seemingly, her arrival had caused Diga and Doddo to stir.

"Wh-What the?! A-Are we going to be executed after all?!"

"Don't be stupid... Come on, just hold out your arms already! Or I guess just do as you please if you want to burn to death!" Lem Dom shouted as she approached Tei. With her knife, she first cut the leather strap binding him to a pillar in the room, and then the ones around his limbs. "All five houses are ablaze! We're already summoning the Zaza and Jeen, but you need to help out too!"

Tei, Diga, and Doddo exited the room, not understanding any of what was happening. Instantly, they were hit with the overwhelming smell of everything burning.

"Whoa, what's going on?"

As they exited the house, they found the settlement ablaze, just as they had been told. The whole world around them was dyed red. The darkness of night and the smoke seemed to be competing against one another in a swirl of black.

"Are you okay?! There's no time for drawing water, so we've got to destroy

the houses before the flames reach the forest!” Deek Dom shouted from beyond the black smoke. As Diga stood there in a daze even so, Lem Dom gave him a hearty kick in the rear.

“Leave that area to the clan head’s group and come help out over here! Use some logs or something to break down the house!”

“R-Right...”

Diga started staggering forward. But he only made it three steps before he suddenly stopped.

“What are you doing?! If you keep dawdling, the forest will catch fire too, so...!” Lem Dom shouted, only for her to stop mid sentence as well.

A figure was standing on the other side of the smoke, even darker than the night itself.

“I’ve been looking for you, Tei Suun... And you too, Diga and Doddo...”

It was a man whose body had atrophied to the point that it was unsettling. As if a human’s bones had put on a pitch-black hide and started moving... It was just that bizarre. Diga, Doddo, and even Lem Dom were all clearly thrown by the strange sight.

But Tei alone accepted it.

Yes... Sure enough, this is my fate...

Only half conscious of his actions, he started walking toward that pitch-black figure that had wasted away to just skin and bones. Eyes darker than any he had ever seen stared straight at him with joy.

“Now then, join me in returning order to the forest’s edge... And we shall repay the nobles of Genos and the Ruu clan fittingly...” Zattsu Suun’s eyes were blazing as he spoke. He held a blade with an arm like a withered branch, and his skull-face was coated in the blood of his comrades.

5

“We’ll teach those arrogant fools how strong we truly are...” Zattsu Suun

muttered while lurking in the shadows of the forest.

It was two days after they had fled from the Dom settlement. Diga and Doddo had run away from Zattsu Suun, leaving only Tei Suun and the former leading clan head present.

Soon a merchant caravan would pass along the animal trail in front of them. When it did, they would move deeper into the forest and use giba summoning fruit to draw the beasts. This was their plan to pillage the merchant caravan's riches, just as they had done ten years ago.

It was difficult to say what could even come of doing so now. Zattsu Suun had assuredly gone mad from his illness. And with that body, he normally would have long since passed away.

And yet, Zattsu Suun still held on to his strength.

The light in his eyes and the power in his voice remained just as formidable as when he had been in his prime. As he bit down on a forbidden black leaf to relieve his pain and fatigue, Zattsu Suun broke out in a devilish grin.

"Damn treasonous Ruu clan... Accursed pompous nobles... You'll all be made to prostrate yourselves before me..."

Zattsu and Tei Suun would surely perish in the forest today. Tei Suun was convinced of that fact.

On this day, the fifteenth of the blue month, a merchant caravan would be passing through the forest of Morga on their way to Sym, just as they had done ten years ago, and the Suun had again been asked to provide guidance. That man, Kamyua Yoshu, who had brought the proposal to the Suun clan possessed strength to rival any hunter of the forest's edge, despite being a townsman. Furthermore, the request had come under Duke Genos's name directly rather than passing through Count Turan. In all likelihood, this was a plot to expose the crimes of the Suun clan.

There were undoubtedly skilled fighters accompanying the merchant caravan. No matter how much giba summoning fruit they used, the ill Zattsu Suun and aged Tei Suun alone would clearly have the tables turned on them and be struck down.

It is all in accordance with the forest's judgment... Tei Suun thought to himself. The uplifting feeling of hunting a giba for the first time in ten years and the sweet dream he experienced at the Dom settlement had all vanished from his heart without a trace. Zattsu and Tei Suun would be killed here today by those townsfolk. That was the fate that awaited them.

"Here they come..." Zattsu Suun whispered with a burning heat.

A large crowd of people could be spotted intermittently, moving beyond the trees. It was a group of thirty or so, roughly the same number as ten years back. They also had a number of totos with them as well, to pull the wagons. And there seemed to only be a few hunters of the forest's edge accompanying the group.

"Hmph... If they have such traitors to the forest's edge with them, we'll need to be especially attentive in gathering giba... Don't slip up, Tei Suun..."

"Right."

"We will rebuild the Suun clan's strength... My bloodline must be the one to rule over the forest's edge..."

"Yes."

If that was the proper path, then the mother forest would choose Zattsu Suun over them.

With this one thought stuck in his head, Tei Suun swung the hilt of his knife down upon the giba summoning fruit in his right hand.

A sweet aroma enveloped Tei Suun's whole body. Drenched in the scent of the fruit, so strong you could almost choke on it, he ran through the forest.

The hoofbeats of despair sounded out behind him. Fortunately, the giba in the area all happened to be starving. As he darted between the trees and occasionally leaped up to high branches, he gathered one mad giba after another.

There had to be nearly ten of them. With this many giba attacking, it could prove a danger even for Kamyua Yoshu's group. But if they were swallowed up

by the fate that Tei and Zattsu Suun brought about, then that would also be down to the forest's guidance. This Tei told himself as he ran down a path where the giba couldn't follow.

Though giba could run faster than any human in a straight line, by leading them left and right, up and down, one could avoid having them catch up. But if they did catch up to him, it would mean his death, plain and simple, so Tei Suun just kept on running emotionlessly.

When at last the rocky gorge entered his field of view, Tei Suun climbed up high atop a tree. Having lost their target, the giba let out a thunderous bellow. His chest was searingly hot as if it were ablaze. It seemed he had unexpectedly run out of stamina. But, well, he was fifty-one years old now.

Here they come...

The merchant group appeared atop the rocks. Not a moment later, giba summoning fruit came flying down from another tree. Apparently, Zattsu Suun had also managed to escape pursuit successfully. Tei Suun cracked open some giba summoning fruit of his own while taking care not to completely shatter the shells, and then similarly threw them at the group down below.

The bellows from the giba echoed throughout the forest. Though they had been starting to disperse, those envoys of destruction now leaped out toward the merchant caravan.

First the hunters acting as guides were taken down. When faced with so many charging giba on such an open rocky surface, there was no way to fight back. And so the hunters fell one after another, taking a number of giba with them.

However, the members of the merchant caravan made some strange movements in the meantime. They started cutting the reins connecting the tolos to the wagons. Over half of the massive birds fled into the forest quicker than the giba could chase. After that, the remaining men climbed atop the wagons. A number of them didn't make it in time and were pierced by giba horns and tusks, but the majority managed to clamber up to the roofs. Then the giba attempting to ram the wagons were shot full of arrows. The men had all been hiding bows and arrows under their cloaks.

One of them even pulled out a long spear from a wagon to stab at the giba.

When a wagon was toppled, the men standing on it swiftly descended to the ground and brandished blades. Then, when the giba faltered, they climbed atop the felled wagon again.

Giba were unable to jump above the height of their own heads. Despite how terribly powerful and agile they were, that was just how their skeletons were put together, it seemed. These men were fully aware of that aspect of a giba's capabilities. And on top of that, they were boldly fighting back against over ten of the beasts. At this rate, there was no way the caravan would be wiped out. Not completely.

"You damn impudent townsfolk!" Zattsu Suun shouted as he leaped down to the rocky ground.

Tei Suun followed after him. The former leading clan head was surely intent on dragging those men down from atop the wagons. Surely, as they were no hunters, they would lack the strength to avoid the giba on even footing.

However, *that man* was also there. The tall blond-haired fellow, Kamyua Yoshu. And he was most certainly just as strong as a hunter of the forest's edge.

Perhaps sensing Zattsu Suun approaching the wagons from behind the giba, Kamyua Yoshu descended to the rocky ground. A giba instantly lunged at him, but he was able to perform a nimble dodge.

As Tei Suun ran in, he could see Zattsu Suun get hit by a longsword still in its leather sheath and fall to the ground. He had no chance of winning against Kamyua Yoshu either, so he left Zattsu Suun's fate to the forest and leaped atop another wagon.

Three men were up there ready to face him. Tei Suun promptly knocked two of them down from the wagon.

The last man, a strange fellow with gray bandages wrapped around his face, cast aside his long spear and reached for his hips. His eyes were gray and cold like moonlight. He now held twin longswords, one in each hand.

"Are you also a member of the Suun clan, old man?" he asked in a chilly tone. "Surrender. Your crimes will be judged in accordance with the laws of Genos."

As if such laws could ever pass judgment on Tei Suun.

No, only the forest could be his judge.

Tei Suun swung the sword he had stolen from the Dom clan. The man's right blade deflected the slash, and his left sliced diagonally across Tei Suun's body.

Instantly, a fiery heat exploded from the old man's chest and stomach. But Tei Suun moved with the momentum of his previous swing and managed to grab the dual-wielder's collar. Behind him was a cliff. If they fell over it, there would be no chance of survival. If this man wanted to live, he had no choice but to kill Tei Suun.

"Let go." Even so, the man's voice remained calm as he punched Tei Suun in the chest. Just like Tei Suun himself had done to someone else ten years prior.

The vice-leader from back then took Tei Suun's necklace with him as he fell.

And now, Tei Suun ended up falling with the bandaged man's cloak in his grasp.

The vice-leader's eyes had been mad with pure hatred, but what sort of gaze was Tei Suun showing? Were his eyes still dead like glass, even now?

As he stared into the bandaged man's chilly gray orbs, Tei Suun plummeted to the bottom of the cliff.

Partway down, his back slammed into a tree growing out of the rock, yet he still kept falling. His shoulder smacked into the cliff face, and he tumbled down the rest of the way until his whole body finally slammed into the ground.

His vision became a jumbled mix of darkness and deep red. Instead of the intense agony he expected, he felt more like his entire body was engulfed in flame. He couldn't even tell if he was breathing. And all the while, numerous thoughts raced through his head.

He questioned if this was death.

Saw his wife smiling sadly beyond the darkness.

Noted Oura's eyes were like glass orbs now too.

Accepted Tsuvai's displeased frown.

A young Diga and Doddo were crying. Mida, with his round figure, was

intently focused on his indulgence in the fruits of Morga. Zuuro Suun acted arrogantly despite his fear of Zattsu Suun's shadow. Yamiru smiled coldly.

As those figures shifted wildly, growing younger and older, they spoke to Tei Suun.

Please, follow the path that you believe in.

I hope mama gets better soon.

Grandpa Tei just does whatever the previous clan head says.

Tei Suun! Do something about Migi Suun!

He's gonna kill us...

Did something sad happen, Tei Suun?

I can't be as bold as my father Zattsu... I've always been a failure...

All sorts of visions and words ran through his head.

And from among them, the cold, clear voice of a woman pierced Tei Suun's soul.

If Zattsu Suun intends to make me shoulder the fate of the Suun, then I shall lead the clan in my own way.

Her eyes were shining with some kind of enjoyment. However, there was no way that she was actually enjoying herself. After all, that girl had been forced to take on the burden of the Suun clan's fate from such a young age. Tei Suun hadn't been able to sense how much she was suffering. In fact, he had even wondered why she had grown up the way she did.

So that's why you killed me? Eyes that burned with lust for revenge scorched Tei Suun's soul. Did you have that right? You said you would leave everything to the forest, then went and cast the Suun clan's future into darkness!

Was that the case?

Was Tei Suun truly the one who brought about the Suun clan's destruction?

If things kept going as they had been and Migi Suun married Yamiru, with the two of them shouldering the fate of the Suun clan together...could they have avoided this end?

Would the light return again to Oura's emotionless eyes that had become like glass orbs?

Could Diga and Doddo have become proud hunters?

Would Mida and Tsvai have grown up to be more proper examples of their people?

And would the people of the forest's edge have taken hold of bright and wondrous lives?

He couldn't say.

Tei Suun had no way to know.

It was the forest that would judge.

"Ugh..."

And then, Tei Suun woke up.

The lifelike nightmares departed, only to be replaced by a nightmarish reality.

I'm...still alive?

He couldn't muster any strength. All he felt was a fiery heat coursing throughout his whole body. Feeling slowly returned to his numb fingertips. One of his hands held a blade, and the other seemed to be holding a leather cloak.

Blood was dripping from his body, like water trickling from rocks. When he turned his head, he could see his torso was now stained a deep red. His wound was deep enough that it was possible his ribs would be visible.

But even so, Tei Suun was still alive.

The mother forest...still hasn't taken my soul?

The world around him was already starting to grow dark. Night was closing in. Apparently, he had spent quite some time in that nightmare.

In that case, he simply needed to lie here and the carrion-eating mundt would finish things. He started to close his eyes, only to sense someone staring at him in the depths of his soul.

Were those his wife's sad eyes, Oura's glassy gaze, or Tsvai's displeased

glare? Or were they perhaps Yamiru's eyes, finally having regained their light?

Whichever it was, Tei Suun slowly forced his body as heavy as lead to sit up.

No...this won't do.

Trusting his fate to the forest?

He could only resign himself like that after having tried his hardest until the bitter end. But Tei Suun hadn't tried at all. There was a time when he'd thrown everything he had into protecting his family and himself, utilizing all his strength to keep living despite his regrets. But now he simply existed, and foisted all responsibility onto fate.

The forest will judge... The forest decides our fate... That's why we must strive our hardest to walk the path set before us... Otherwise, we have no right to live in the forest.

Tei Suun reached toward his chest that was still dripping with blood. From within his clothes he retrieved one of the forbidden leaves he had received from Zattsu Suun and chewed it up. Then he started to rise to his feet.

Hmph, it doesn't even completely get rid of the pain.

Even so, Tei Suun managed to stand up. He placed his sword in its sheath and draped the leather cloak he had taken from the man over his shoulders.

First, I must close these wounds. And then...

And then, he would seek out his own fate.

As the world around him went dark, Tei Suun slowly started walking, leaving bloody footsteps behind.



Tei Suun sought his fate from Asuta of the Fa clan.

Though he hesitated, he couldn't help but feel that the strange youth born in a foreign land was the right person for the task. This young man had been the one to shatter Zattsu Suun's ambitions. The Ruu clan head Donda Ruu and Fa clan head Ai Fa also played a part in it, but Asuta was at the core of it all. At first Tei Suun had thought Donda Ruu had used Asuta and the role he was now

playing as a blade to strike down the Suun, but in actuality it seemed as if the truth was the complete opposite.

Had Zattsu Suun been mistaken? Were the Fa and Ruu who destroyed the Suun capable of leading the forest's edge toward a proper future? Tei Suun was heading to the post town to find out for himself.

“So, can I now have some of your cooking?”

Once he had cast aside his blade, Asuta held out a dish. It was a strange creation, made with giba meat with no stench and round baked poitan.

When Tei Suun bit into it, an indescribable taste spread throughout his mouth. It was so delicious that the meal he'd had back at the clan head meeting couldn't even begin to compare.

This truly may be able to move the hearts of the people of Genos.

Tei Suun was satisfied.

And so, he moved to carry out his final task.

As the last survivor of the Suun clan, he had to offer up his soul.

Tei Suun kicked off the ground and grabbed Asuta. As he did, the surrounding hunters cut into his back and right shoulder, but that was nothing. Just like Zattsu Suun, Tei Suun's body should have already lost the strength needed to stay alive. If they wanted to finish off a walking corpse, they would need to do much more damage than that.

After blocking a blow from the youngest Ruu son with a metal pan, he clenched his left hand around Asuta's throat. And then, Tei Suun broke out in a grin.

“All of you are sickening traitors! I'll give you one last bit of payback for destroying the Suun clan!”

If he became a vicious criminal for the people of the forest's edge to judge, then maybe it would help at least a little to lighten the resentment the townsfolk held. The fear and hatred he and Zattsu Suun had instilled in Genos needed to be cleared by the hands of the people of the forest's edge.

The female hunter from the Fa and the several others who were aligned with the Ruu surrounded him and Asuta. Surely such daring hunters wouldn't fail to bring him down.

And yet...

"The laws of the forest's edge and the town have nothing to do with this! The great Zattsu Suun was trying to grant us new laws and a new order in place of them! You damn fools just weren't able to understand his grand intentions! You're all weaklings unable to do anything but serve the townsfolk! You freely gave away our one and only means of resisting them!"

"I'm tired of hearing that crap! You talk about new laws and order, but you bastards just skulked around like bandits!"

"We simply tried to take back the fortune that was unjustly stolen from us! We wished to get ahold of our just reward for risking our lives to protect the fields of Genos! The ones who should be ashamed are the citizens of Genos, who wish to keep us trapped at the forest's edge while they line their pockets!"

As he shouted, a strange feeling began filling Tei Suun's heart.

He was about to die an unsightly death as a treasonous criminal. All he had been intending to do now was to confess to their crimes...but the words kept pouring out one after another, far faster than he had expected.

"For eighty years, we obeyed the unjust laws thrust upon us by Genos! How many do you think starved to death during that time?! And yet we remained forbidden from touching the bounty of the forest and kept on earnestly hunting giba! It's the same for our newborn children, long suffering elders, and hunters who are injured fighting giba... Even without anyone keeping an eye on us, none of them lay a hand on the fruits of the forest, and they just keep on foolishly following those laws till they starve to death! Genos killed all of them! I absolutely cannot accept that as being our proper fate!"

"I don't agree with that either! That's why I started doing business here, to bring prosperity to the forest's edge!" Asuta desperately shouted.

Tei Suun burst out laughing, surprising even himself.

It almost reminded him of Zattsu and Migi Suun.

“What foolishness! Why should we need to take such a detour when there’s fruit overflowing right in front of our very eyes?! If we could just partake of the bounty of the forest, we’d have no need for coins at all! That’s the proper way to live for people who take the forest as their god!”

“But that would leave the western fields to be overrun by giba! The people of the forest’s edge are also citizens of the western kingdom, so wouldn’t the proper way of living be for everyone to support one another?!”

“That was why we needed even greater strength! And we would obtain it if no one were to starve any longer! With that, our five hundred brethren could grow to over a thousand, allowing us to hunt more giba than ever before! And in turn, no giba would attack those fields even with us taking as much as we please from the forest!”

Had Zattsu Suun possessed him? Having died full of spite and regret, was he now borrowing Tei Suun’s mouth to let his feelings be heard?

No...

These were regrets that had undoubtedly been swirling about in Tei Suun’s own heart.

Though Zattsu Suun had undeniably been cruel and merciless, he held his pride as a person of the forest’s edge at his core. Tei Suun had been unable to accept that because he was weak. He lacked Zattsu Suun’s tenacious spirit, and valued his family’s security above the future of his people.

It wasn’t as if Zattsu Suun had been in the right.

However, he hadn’t been entirely wrong either.

The citizens of Genos scorned the people of the forest’s edge even before Tei Suun and the others began committing their crimes and the Ruu clan had been openly rebellious. It wasn’t as if Tei Suun felt no anger over those facts. He had only forced those feelings down because of his own weakness.

Why did they need to be looked down upon by the people of Genos?

They put their lives on the line in order to protect the fields.

And why did the Ruu clan need to defy them?

How much did the nobles of Genos scorn the people of the forest's edge and make light of them? Why did they have to swallow such vile humiliation at the hands of the Ruu, who were insulated from such disdain and lived like pure, innocent maidens?

"You've been baring your fangs at the Suun clan for twenty years now. And so we needed to start by gaining enough strength to overcome you! Otherwise, the other clans would fear your wrath and pay our words no heed. And so, we were steadily, quietly amassing power while protecting our people and fortune!"

Is that really true? he thought as he shouted.

Those were Zattsu Suun's words, and at the same time also Tei Suun's.

However, there was only one person Tei Suun could never forgive: Migi Suun.

He had brought about that Muufa woman's death, twisted Diga's and Dodd's souls, insulted Oura, and tried to take Yamiru into his sinister clutches... Tei Suun would never be able to forgive that man. If only Zattsu Suun hadn't started plotting to make such a fiend his successor, everything might have played out in an entirely different way.

However, Zattsu Suun feared the nobles of Genos and the Ruu clan. I can tell that now. He was afraid of them because with just his own strength he could do nothing against them.

That fear had driven Zattsu Suun mad.

Everything was ever so slightly off.

And his comrades were the ones ultimately responsible.

If they had denounced Migi Suun for his crimes that night... If they had admonished Zattsu Suun when he had plotted to trample over the laws of the forest's edge... If they had been able to give that lonely king the peace and tranquility he needed, things never would have ended up like this. But the truth was, they had thrust everything on Zattsu Suun. He had seemed so strong, and they thought he could never need their help, so they never even offered it.

Zattsu Suun came to value only his own pride.

They were the ones who made him that way.

And so Zattsu Suun started to believe that his was the one and only correct opinion.

The Ruu clan head Donda Ruu now possessed as much strength as a leader as Zattsu Suun ever had. The heads of the Rutim, the Lea, and the other clans under them looked upon him with pride, and they seemed to live side by side, working together.

If Tei Suun's comrades had worked together with Zattsu Suun like that...then the former leading clan head surely would have led them well with his great strength.

"That's insane! Don't you see how he's smiling away calmly despite how heavily he's wounded?! What if he snaps Asuta's neck while you're aiming for his head?!"

Tei Suun suddenly realized the youngest Ruu son was shouting not at him, but at someone else. It was a soldier from the castle town clad in white armor. He could never forget those chilly gray eyes. So then, the merchant caravan truly had been a trap set by Genos.

"That's perfect! Kill each other! That's exactly what you should have been doing this whole time! Until one side destroys the other, the hatred between the people of the forest's edge and the citizens of Genos will never vanish!" Tei Suun shouted, following the impulses now driving him. This would do just fine. There had been no need for the farce of trying to play the role of some great villain and bringing about his own destruction. He was the last survivor of the Suun clan, and Zattsu Suun's tenacity would carry him forward till the bitter end.

If their strength was not enough to take him down, then there would never be a bright future for the people of the forest's edge.

He dared them to destroy him. To use their strength to slice open the path to a new future.

That was what Tei Suun thought as he strangled Asuta.

And then...

That female hunter of the Fa, Ai Fa, calmly stood before him.

“Do you hate Asuta that much? All he’s done is try to bring prosperity to the forest’s edge. He has given that goal his all, so that none of our people will have to starve to death any longer. If the Suun clan held the same ambitions, then can you not see the ones to inherit that task are Asuta, the Fa clan, and the Ruu?”

“All you’re doing is wagging your tails at your masters from Genos! No matter how much prosperity such methods may bring, they will never give us back our pride!”

“That’s not true at all! I... No, all of us want to live together in harmony with Genos, not just follow them obediently! Our hope is to live together under the same laws as comrades, rather than try to trample all over what exists now!” the boy, Asuta, interjected.

Tei Suun knew all that.

But speaking of ideals alone wouldn’t be enough to carve out a new future.

These people, they didn’t yet know how crafty the nobles of Genos, Count Cyclaeus Turan in particular, really were.

“Comrades, you say? You would call Genos our comrades after how they have unjustly oppressed us?! You fool! Genos is an enemy we must force to submit!”

“I don’t believe that! And I can’t imagine Ai Fa and these folks from the Ruu do either! The people of the forest’s edge have obeyed the law of their own will, so even if it’s unjust, no one has felt like they’ve been oppressed! If the Suun clan alone holds such regrets... Then they must have come from the castle,” Asuta shouted. “The Ruu, Zaza, and Sauti will take up those frustrations in your place. They’re acting as the leading clans instead of the Suun now, and will be the ones to interact with the castle. Those regrets held by the Suun clan alone will then be felt by the whole of the forest’s edge now. And yet, we will strive with all our might to form proper bonds with them, rather than submitting. So... Won’t you please entrust us with the future of the forest’s edge?”

“What are you, stupid...?” Tei Suun shot back. “What do I care for the future

of the forest's edge?! I'll soon be dead! Zattsu Suun has already passed too! Ruin and despair is the only fitting fate for a world where the Suun clan has fallen! The forest's edge, this town, and the castle can all be destroyed for all I care!"

An immense amount of blood was gushing from the wound on his back. Tei Suun's life wouldn't last much longer now. If the people of the forest's edge lacked the strength to even bring down someone in his state...then it was unfortunate, but Asuta's soul would have to return to the forest alongside him. The forest would surely accept the soul of this young chef. Even if he had been born in a foreign nation, Asuta was a true and proper person of the forest's edge.

"Then take my life as a final souvenir..." Ai Fa suddenly muttered powerlessly, approaching Tei Suun.

"I told you, don't come any closer! Do you really think you can make an opening by stating such nonsense, clan head of the Fa?"

"That's not my intention at all. I simply have no intention of shamelessly living on after my clan member faces such harm in front of my very eyes... If you're going to kill Asuta, then do the same to me!"

"Ai Fa! What are you saying?!"

No matter how dauntless she might appear, apparently she was still a woman in the end. It seemed she would not be the one to bring about Tei Suun's demise.

Ai Fa tossed aside her sword, and held out her remaining knife toward Tei Suun. "You can take my life using this blade. If at all possible, I would prefer it that you kill me first... I don't wish to see Asuta die."

"Stop! Don't come closer! I won't play into your crafty plot! You intend to hand that blade to this brat rather than me, don't you?!"

"What are you saying? Asuta is no stronger than your average woman. No matter how injured you may be, you should be able to easily grab the blade before him, right?"

"Stop right there!" Tei Suun shouted. "My right arm can't move! Your blades

must have severed the muscles in my right shoulder. So thanks to that, I can only take one of you down with me! I'll be strangling this brat to death soon, so if you want to die so badly, then stab yourself in the throat!"

"I see... So you truly can't move your right arm after all, Tei Suun."

Not a moment after Ai Fa muttered that, a hot sensation rushed up Tei Suun's left arm. At the same time, all the strength in the limb gave out from his elbow on down and Ai Fa snatched Asuta away.

Then...

An even hotter sensation ran across his throat.

His vision was awash in white light.

Suddenly, he felt his back slamming into something.

No, wait, Tei Suun had been standing with his back to a tree to begin with. It seemed without him realizing it, he had crumbled to the ground.

"You shameless fool... Your Suun clan cast aside their pride to live without hardship, so what would you know of the pain of losing your child to starvation?" a dark shadow said from beyond the light. It was impossible to tell what he looked like, but the speaker was assuredly a person of the forest's edge.

And so, all was as it should be.

So it's finally over?

His consciousness was rapidly fading.

The white light steadily grew black...and the faces of his family passed through the back of his mind.

Oura, Tsuvai... Mida, Diga, Doddo... Now that you have discarded the Suun name, you should live on alongside your new comrades.

Yamiru, you too... You don't need to be bound by the Suun name any further...

Zuuro Suun, you will have to die a martyr for the Suun just like the leading clan head, no doubt... It's unfortunate, but I'm sure the forest will accept your soul as well...while Zattsu Suun's soul will inevitably be shattered by Selva's spear... Just

prepare yourself, and know that you are far better off than that...

The people around him seemed to be offering responses to Tei Suun's words, but he lacked the strength needed to hear them.

Beyond that, a strangely clear voice asked, "Tei Suun... On the night of the clan head meeting, were you the one who helped Ai Fa?"

Two black shadows seemed to be looking down on him. Perhaps they were Asuta and Ai Fa. They could have been nothing but an illusion he was seeing on the verge of death, or perhaps it was one final glimpse of the living world. Tei Suun couldn't say, but regardless, he gave them a smile.

It wouldn't do to mistake him for a kind man.

It wasn't as if he had rescued Ai Fa out of any concern for her wellbeing. He just didn't want his blood relations, Diga and Doddo, to sully their hands further.

That's the sort of narrow-minded man I am, Asuta...

Now the curtain could finally close on the Suun clan.

Tei Suun would leave the remaining hardships to those he left behind.

And he prayed that they were heading toward a bright future.

With that final thought, Tei Suun yielded his body and soul to the warm, gentle darkness.



Afterword

You have my deepest thanks for picking up this book, the eighteenth volume of *Cooking with Wild Game*.

I know I say this every time, but it truly is thanks to all of you picking up the series that I've been able to make it this far. You have my greatest thanks.

Now then, the main story in this volume ended up being a bit on the short side. That's because the size of the web version published earlier was just too big, so it ended up having to be split into two volumes.

This is the same thing we did with volumes fourteen and fifteen, so I intentionally tried to make the Group Performance as long as possible. Thanks to the number of pages, there was no way around splitting things up this time.

It would have also been possible to revise the main story to try to slim it down, but I happened to have a long Group Performance in the hundred page range, so I decided to go ahead with publishing that.

I'm sure some people will be disappointed with the shorter main story this time, but please rest assured that it is set to take up a larger portion of the next volume.

Allow me also say a few things about the approximately one-hundred-page-long Group Performance, "The Downfall of a Lineage."

I would call it a bit of a unique story in terms of the overall work. It's a deeply serious story about the downfall of the former leading clan, the Suun, so it's almost entirely devoid of any heartwarming elements. But at the same time, I consider it an important story for the series, and I hope that you all enjoy it.

However, there is one thing I'm concerned about.

As I mentioned in a previous afterword, there were originally thirteen Group

Performance stories, and they were all published at the same time.

To be precise, they were put out around the same time as volume thirteen of the printed edition. In other words, they came right after matters with the Suun clan and Count Turan were settled, before everything with Myme's introduction and so on came into play with the fourteenth volume.

As for what the concern is, it has to do with the time difference between the web versions and these published ones.

Memories of the conflict with the Suun clan were still relatively fresh when the web versions were published, so it was no issue. But for those who only read the published versions, that is all far in the past.

After all, volume thirteen was published back in February of last year. And the matters with the Suun clan wrapped up more or less in volume seven, which goes back even further.

There is the fact that the father of Kamyua Yoshu's apprentice Leito and the younger brother of Milano Mas, the owner of The Kimyuus's Tail, were once members of a group heading through the settlement at the forest's edge toward Sym, and they were killed by the Suun clan. Or that Ai Fa was kidnapped by Diga and Doddos Suun at the clan head meeting and rescued by Tei Suun. Hopefully such stories still remain in your memory as you read this tale.

Also, while I realize this may not be necessary to say, parts one through three of "The Downfall of a Lineage" take place several years before the main story, while part four is linked to a period shown in the main tale.

Asuta met the people of the Suun clan and exposed their crimes at the clan head meeting. Just what was Tei Suun thinking and doing during that time? It's all shown here in this story.

I have strong feelings personally in regards to "The Downfall of a Lineage," and I hope that you all end up feeling much the same.

Well then, I suppose it's about time to wrap up this afterword.

Both the main story and extra ones this time lean toward more serious matters, but next time the more heartwarming elements should return. Please refer to the advertisement at the end of the book if you wish to know more.

Ah, and this is a bit of a digression, but I believe the announcement of a new work being published by MF Books should be shown on the strip around this volume. If you have any interest in it, then please also give that a look.

Let me finish by giving thanks to everyone involved with the production of this book, and of course, all of you who purchased it.

I hope to see you all again in the next volume!

June 2019,

EDA



Bonus Short Story

The Hunter's Pride and the Clan Member's Thoughts

"What are you looking so unhappy for?"

It was currently late in the evening on the day when the lord of the forest had been taken down.

A dinner was being held at the Sauti settlement, and when Yamiru Lea started speaking to Rau Lea, he shot her a glare like some starving beast.

"That should go without saying. I can't stand the fact that I hardly helped at all in taking down the lord of the forest!"

"What are you talking about? Donda Ruu said that if anyone had been missing, they never would have taken the beast down, didn't he?"

"But I didn't even manage to cut off the leg I was assigned to. Everyone else was able to carry out their tasks just fine!" Rau Lea replied with a childish pout.

Taking in his expression, Yamiru Lea shrugged. "The way you hunters think sure is tiresome. You threw yourselves up against that monstrous giba, so can't you at least feel fortunate to have made it through with your life intact?"

"No hunter of the forest's edge could ever be so weak-willed! As the Lea clan head, I have to be the sort of hunter you can all feel proud of!"

"Hmph. I can't say I care about any of that, though."

"What was that?!" Rau Lea angrily shot back.

However, Yamiru Lea kept talking in order to mollify his rage. "No matter how great or mediocre your accomplishments might have been, the thought of you getting seriously injured like Ai Fa and the others sends a chill down my spine. Your pride as a hunter is all well and good, but why not consider how your clan members feel now and again?"

"Were you seriously that worried about me?"

“Is there any person belonging to any clan here at the forest’s edge who doesn’t worry about their clan head?”

Rau Lea scratched his head with a complicated look on his face, only for Yamiru Lea to stealthily stick out her tongue. All around them, the members of the Sauti clan were biting into giba meat, their expressions overflowing with hope, having been freed from the menace of the lord of the forest.

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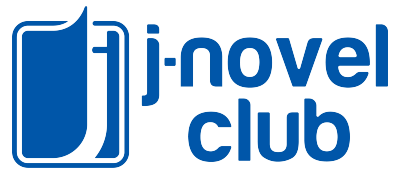
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Cooking with Wild Game: Volume 18

by EDA

Translated by Gwendolyn Warner Edited by Adam Fogle

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